

Differential Maltreatment of Girls and Boys

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Sex differences in vulnerability to child abuse and neglect are analyzed from data based on 87,789 case reports to the American Humane Association in 1976.

Among infants under one year of age, girls are more often abused and neglected than boys, but among two-year-olds, boys are at greater risk than girls. Beyond 12 years of age, girls are at higher risk, an effect only partly attributable to sexual abuse.

These results are discussed in relation to the cross-cultural prevalence of preference for sons, sex differences in the incidence of developmental problems, and double standards of parental discipline.

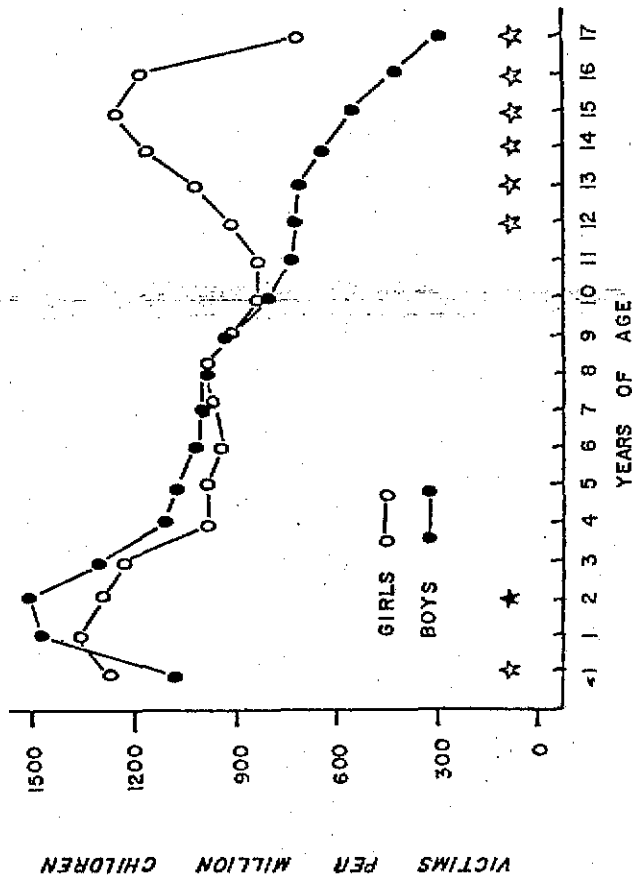
Sex differences in vulnerability to abuse and neglect have received scant attention. The principal exception is in studies of specifically sexual abuse (Burgess et al., 1977; Finkelhor, 1979). Many researchers have noted approximately equal numbers of boys and girls in samples of abuse victims (Smith and Hanson, 1974; Maden and Wrench, 1977; Gonzales-Pardo and Thomas, 1977; Banagale and McIntire, 1975; Gil, 1970). This is also true of the large sample of American Humane Association maltreatment case reports analyzed below. However, some researchers (Gil, 1970; Fergusson et al., 1972; Gelles, 1977) have noted that abuse and neglect do not vary identically as a function of age in the two sexes. In this paper, we document sex differences in age-specific risks of various type of maltreatment.

The data presented here represent 87,789 case reports on abused and/or neglected children (persons under 18 years of age). These were all the validated cases reported in 1976 to the American Humane Association, Englewood, Colorado, from the 28 states and 3 territories, then comprising 44.6% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1978), which were then full participants in a national program for reporting standard information (AHA reporting form 0024) on suspected abuse or neglect.

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Figure 1. Age specific incidence of validated cases of abuse of boys (●-●; N = 13,049) and girls (○-○; N = 14,775) in U. S. A. for 1976. Significantly (p < .01 by Chi-square) greater incidences of abuse for boys at particular ages are indicated by ★ and for girls by ☆.

INCIDENCE OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE USA, 1976



data from American Humane Assoc. & US Bureau of Census

Figure 2. Age-specific incidence of validated cases of neglect of boys (●-●; N = 35,195) and girls (○-○; N = 33,900). Significantly ($p < .01$ Chi-square) greater incidences of neglect for boys at particular ages are indicated by ★ and for girls by ☆.

INCIDENCE OF CHILD NEGLECT IN THE USA, 1976

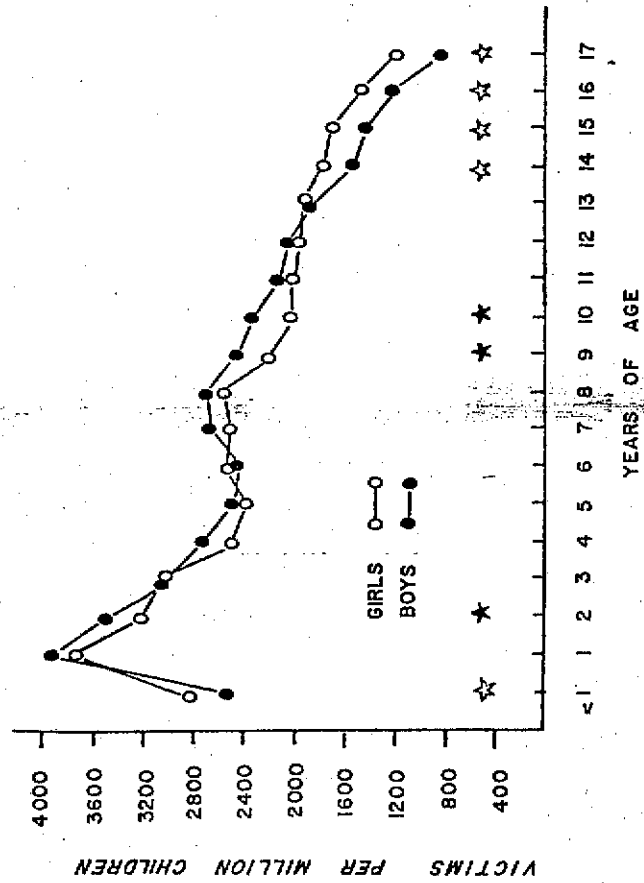
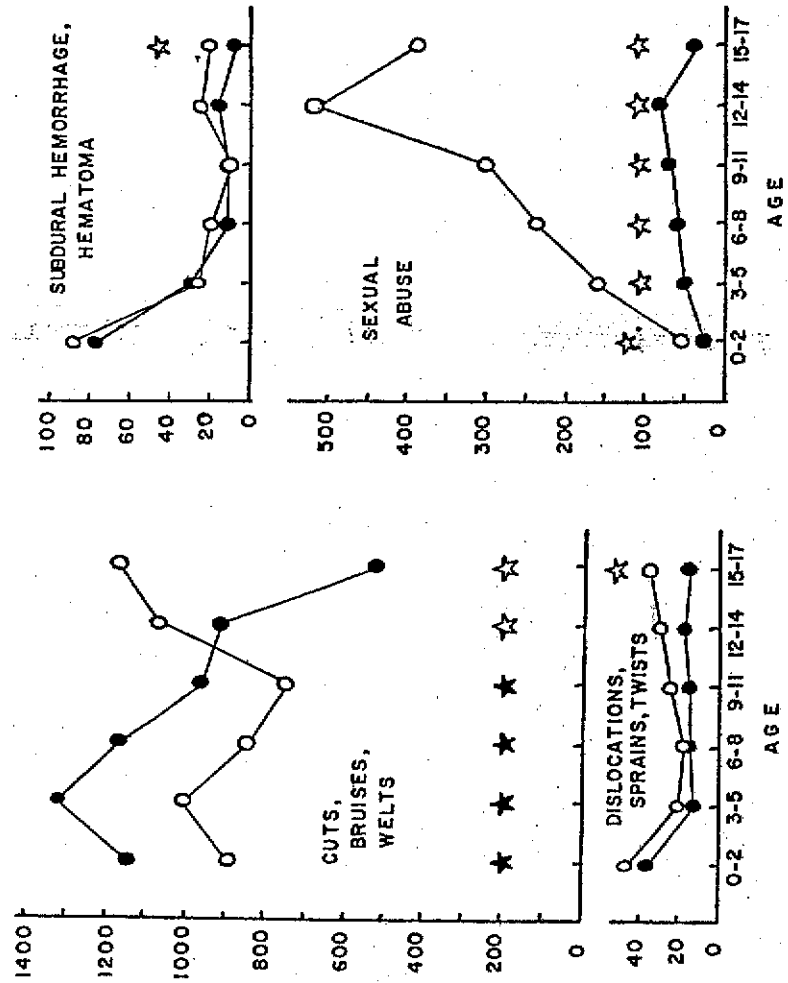
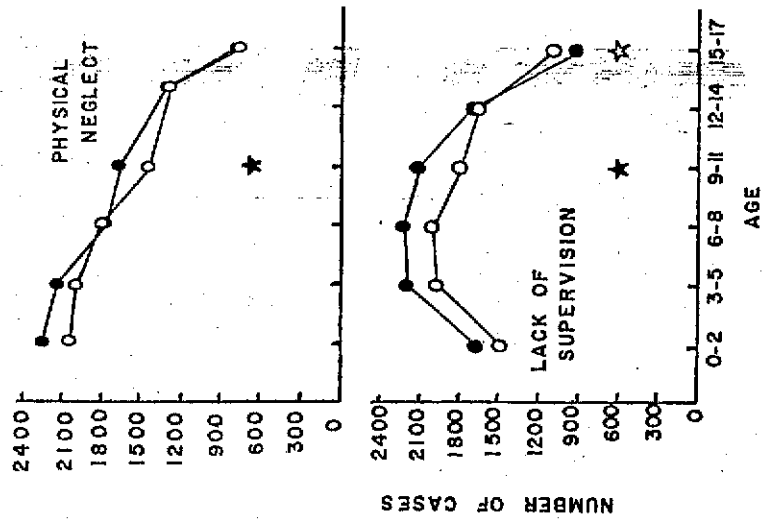
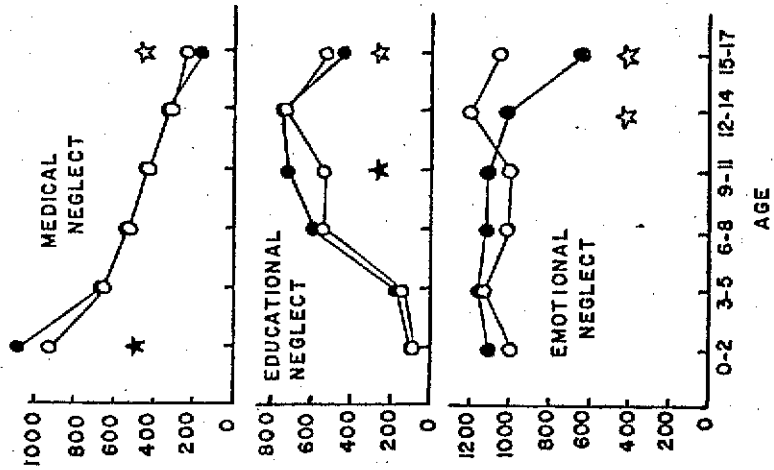


Figure 3. Age-specific frequencies of validated cases of particular types of abuse and neglect of children in U.S.A. for 1976. Significantly ($p < .01$ by Chi-square) greater numbers of cases (relative to population sex ratios) for boys at particular ages are indicated by ★ and for girls by ☆. (Data from American Humane Association, 1978, Tables 4.7.1 and 4.7.2).





Incidences of Abuse and Neglect

The age-specific incidences of abuse and neglect for children of each sex are shown in Figures 1 and 2. Incidences were computed relative to age- and sex-specific national population numbers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977) multiplied by 0.446 (the proportion of the entire U.S. population residing in the AHA reporting areas).

Significant age-specific sex differences in abuse and neglect risk are indicated in Figures 1 and 2. In small children, abuse and neglect exhibit similar sex effects: among infants under one year of age, girls are at greater risk of both than are boys. Among 2-years-olds, boys are at greater risk than girls. At ages 9 and 10, boys are more often neglected than girls, but are not more often abused. Beyond age 12, girls are at greater risk than boys, a difference that is far more dramatic with respect to abuse risk than neglect risk. While sexual abuse is partly responsible for this effect, adolescent girls are at considerably greater risk of physical abuse than are boys even when sexual abuse cases are excluded.

Figure 3 presents age-specific frequencies of those types of abuse and neglect for which significant sex differences occurred ($p < .01$ by Chi-square, with expected values based on age-specific populational sex ratios). Data available for these analyses were limited to three-year age categories (American Humane Association, 1978); in view of the reversals between ages 0 and 2 in Figures 1 and 2, further sex effects might have been apparent with a finer categorization of age. Here it can be seen that adolescent girls stand a greater risk of both sexual and non-sexual physical abuse than do boys.

Perpetrators of abuse

The perpetrators of abuse, when identified, are most frequently biological parents of the victims. Relative to their numbers in the population at large, however, step-parents are more frequent abusers than natural parents (Wilson et al., 1980). In the case of neglect, identification of a single perpetrator seems inappropriate, but step-parent households are again disproportionately represented among neglect victims, though to a lesser extent than among abuse victims (Wilson et al., 1980).

Census information does not permit the separate estimation of incidence of step-father and step-mother households, so that risks in the two types of step-household cannot be readily compared. One can, however, demonstrate a contingency between substitute parent's sex and victim's sex among physical abuse cases (Table 1), indicating a tendency toward relatively more abuse of like-sexed children by substitute parents (step, foster and adoptive parents). No similar tendency is evident among natural parents.

Out of a sample of 1,637 validated cases of sexual abuse, 1,369 (83.6%) involved female victims. For female victims, 906 perpetrators (66.2%) were biological parents (590 fathers and 316 mothers), and 394 (28.8%) were substitute parents (376 men and 18 women). For male vic-

tims, 183 perpetrators (68.3%) were biological parents (87 fathers and 96 mothers) and 62 (23.1%) were substitute parents (55 men and 7 women).

TABLE 1

Physical abuse (excluding specifically sexual abuse) victims (all ages) categorized according to victim's sex, perpetrator's sex and substitute versus biological parent relationship. Based on a sample of 40,752 validated cases of abuse or neglect reported to the American Humane Association, 1976.

		PERPETRATOR			
		Substitute Parent		Biological Parent	
		male	female	male	female
VICTIM	male	973	234	2,356	3,058
	female	877	268	2,176	3,010

Chi square (1df) = 7.62, $p < .01$ Chi square (1df) = 2.63, $p > .10$

DISCUSSION

Why Might an Infant's Sex Be Relevant to Risk?

Among the youngest American infants, girls are apparently abused and neglected more than boys (Figures 1 and 2). A partial explanation for this difference may reside in a parental preference for sons. Such a preference is widespread cross-culturally (Williamson, 1973), and has been documented in American surveys (Hoffman, 1975; Coombs et al., 1975). Preference for sons is evidently more strongly felt by men than women (Williamson, 1973; Hoffman, 1975). This suggests that female-preferential abuse and neglect of infants may not occur in single-mother households, an hypothesis testable from child abuse registries.

In a number of case reports, the abused child was unwanted; indeed, pregnant women who later abused their children have sometimes given clear notice of their desire to avoid the impending motherhood (Lukianowicz, 1971). We may speculate that parents sometimes want a child of a specified sex only, perhaps usually a male (see below); certainly, after amniocentesis, fetal sex can be a factor in decisions to abort (Fletcher, 1979). Lack of desire for a particular child may be one contributing factor in "bonding" failures (Klaus and Kennell, 1976) which may in turn be predictive of abuse risk (O'Connor et al., 1977, unpublished; Daly and Wilson, 1980). Such factors may provide the link between parental preference for sons and greater maltreatment of infant daughters. On the other hand, male infants are more susceptible than females to a variety of medical problems (Carter, 1978; Peterson et al., 1979) requiring extended hospitalization with resultant risk of bonding failure and parental abuse (Lynch, 1976; Lynch and Roberts, 1977; Hunter et al., 1978). This consideration suggests that bonding failures

will differentially promote abuse of sons and we are tempted to invoke this argument to explain the greater risk among males at later ages. Clearly, more study of parental bonding and the implications of its weakening are needed in order to understand its probable effects upon abuse and neglect risk of children at various ages.

Dickemann (1979, 1981) has suggested that anti-daughter bias (including female-selective infanticide) is positively correlated in highly stratified societies with socio-economic status (SES). She offers a theoretical rationale for such a status-graded bias, and some archival evidence from Indian, Chinese, Islamic, Japanese and European sources. Dickemann's theory suggests the following hypothesis, testable from child abuse registries: the greater relative risk of abuse and neglect of first-year daughters over sons should prove to be more extreme in higher SES groups (which is not to deny that overall risk for both girls and boys may decline with increasing SES; Garbarino, 1976; Pelton, 1978). A related argument has been presented by Lenington (1981).

Why Might a Young Child's Sex Be Relevant to Risk?

In slightly older children, especially among two-year-olds, the infantile sex difference in maltreatment risk is reversed, with males becoming likelier to be both abused and neglected (Figures 1 and 2). The risk difference in this age group may be related to other aspects of behavioral sex differences observed in young children (Pringle et al., 1966; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Eme, 1979). It has been well documented that young boys exceed girls in activity levels (Battle and Lacey, 1972; Richman et al., 1975; Birns, 1976; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974; Baumrind and Black, 1967; Smith and Daghli, 1977), aggressivity toward others (Pearce, 1978; Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974), destruction of objects (Pringle et al., 1966), soiling pants (Richman et al., 1975; Pringle et al., 1966), proneness to accidents (Gratz, 1979) and to illnesses (Pringle et al., 1966), resistance to parental requests (Minton et al., 1971), temperamental irritability (Pringle et al., 1966), and various psychopathologies (Eme, 1979). Furthermore, parents behave differentially to sons and daughters: both mothers and fathers encourage achievement and competitiveness in sons (Hoffman, 1977); discipline practices involve more physical punishment and more prohibitions for young sons than daughters (Minton et al., 1971); parents are less tolerant of sons' problems (Shepard et al., 1966). Small boys may therefore be at higher risk of physical abuse as a result of difficulties experienced by the parent in controlling and interacting with the child. Parents who have physically abused their child acknowledge precipitating factors such as incessant crying on the part of the child, failure of the child to obey, and the child's irritable temperament (Smith and Hanson, 1974; Ounsted et al., 1974; Morse et al., 1970). These explanations for their abusive behavior may just be *post hoc* rationalizations; however, it is likely that they are real psychological irritants which aroused the parents' anger.

Why Might an Adolescent's Sex Be Relevant to Risk?

The most dramatic effect of victim's sex in the data presented here is the high incidence of abuse of teenage girls. The most obvious contributing factor is differential risk of specifically sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is surely underreported in our AHA data since children do not report on the parents, mothers may not report on the father, or may even encourage the child to cooperate, and medical doctors do not typically examine physical abuse victims for the possibility of sexual abuse (Sgroi, 1977; Finkelhor, 1979; Brant and Tisza, 1977). A likely complication in sexual abuse data is double standards for reportage (Finkelhor, 1979; Swift, 1977). Consider brother-sister incest, for example: if reported at all, it is likely to be considered abuse of the girl only.

However frequent sexual abuse may really be, it was reported in just 10.8% of AHA physical abuse cases and 25.8% of cases of physical abuse of adolescent girls. It should be noted that the increase of physical abuse risk in teenaged girls remains apparent when specifically sexual abuse cases are excluded. Furthermore, when non-sexual physical abuse by male and female perpetrators is considered separately, both subsamples manifest this elevation of risk for teenage girls. It is of course possible that validated physical abuse cases often involve undetected sexual abuse as well, so that the hypothesis that sex differences in teenage abuse risk are entirely due to sexual abuse risk cannot be definitely rejected. On present evidence, however, it appears that teenaged girls are at substantially greater risk than boys for both sexual and non-sexual abuse.

One likely explanation is that differential abuse represents only the extreme of a general tendency to sterner parental discipline, stricter guidelines and more severe punishment for adolescent girls than boys (Gil, 1970). Such a double standard in discipline derives in large measure from a double standard about sexual activity and fear of daughters becoming pregnant or otherwise "ruined." Parents' concern about daughters' chastity is widespread cross-culturally and leads to extreme claustration practices in societies that place special value on the virginity of brides (Dickemann, 1979, forthcoming). American parents are likewise more concerned about the activities and whereabouts of their daughters than their sons (Devereux et al., 1969). According to a national probability sample survey of 6,768 American youths (Scanlon, 1975), parents exercise greater authority over daughters' friendships than sons' (Table 2). Also, at 17 years of age, 90% of girls versus 79% of boys said that their parents exercised authority over how late they could stay out (Scanlon, 1975, Table 18).

TABLE 2

Percentage of American boys and girls whose parents, according to the children's reports, continue to exercise authority over which friends the children may go out with. (After Scanlon, 1975, Table 17).

Age:	12	13	14	15	16	17
Boys	48.6	43.4	38.5	35.0	29.2	27.8
Girls	56.7	56.3	57.9	56.1	53.3	46.1

Sample survey results indicate that teenaged boys run away from home as much or more than teenaged girls, according to both self-reports and parental reports (Scanlon, 1975; Walker, 1975). Nevertheless, 57.4% of arrested runaways are girls (U. S. Department of Justice, 1979, Table 34), presumably because runaway girls are likelier to be reported, and are sooner reported, than are runaway boys. This would appear to be another instance in which a double standard of acceptable conduct by daughters and sons prevails.

A factor in some adolescent abuse cases is evidently parental jealousy of the children's youth, perhaps exacerbated by a "mid-life crisis" in the parent (Fox, 1980). More generally, we would argue that much parent-offspring conflict derives psychologically from a developing element of competitiveness in what was formerly a clearly hierarchical parent-child relationship (see also Lourie, 1977; Fisher and Berdie, 1978; Libbey and Bybee, 1979). Such conflict might be expected to be especially acute in like-sexed relationships. However, the data in Table 1 indicate like-sexed bias in abuse by substitute parents only. Furthermore, this tendency for substitute parents to be likelier to abuse like-sexed children is not peculiar to adolescents, but is strongest (and significant at $p < .01$) with infants under two years of age.

Finally, the sex difference in adolescent abuse risk (and in parental discipline generally) must reflect in part decreasing parental capacity to dominate maturing sons. It is not unusual for a 16-year-old boy to be larger and stronger than his mother and even his father. This factor may largely account for the steady decline in male abuse risk with age, but does not of course explain the large increase in female abuse risk.

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