

The Relationship Between Childhood Experience of Neglect and Self-Esteem in Low Income Adolescents

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Abstract

- Of the 4.4 million referrals received by CPS agencies in 2019 alleging maltreatment, neglect continues to be the most reported type of child maltreatment.
- Over half a million children experience substantiated incidents of abuse and neglect each year.
- The current study is a secondary data analysis of data collected by the *Longitudinal Pathways to Resilience in Maltreated Children*.
- The sample consisted of 300 low-income abused and non-abused children from Upstate New York who attended a summer camp.
- A series of Spearman rho Correlations and independent t-tests were conducted.
- Although inconsistent with the literature, study findings suggest that it is important to consider self-esteem levels of abused children.
- Further studies should consider additional important environmental factors that may increase resilience in neglected children.

Introduction

Significance of Study

- 656,000 children were considered victims of abuse and/or neglect in 2019, with 1,840 child fatalities that occurred due to child maltreatment.
- Maltreatment of any type can cause long-term physical consequences, as well as increase the risk of developing a specific health condition such as diabetes, heart disease, and substance abuse.

Purpose

- To examine the relationship between the experience of child maltreatment, specifically physical neglect in toddlerhood, and self-esteem in low-income adolescents.

Hypothesis

- Individuals who experienced physical neglect in toddlerhood will exhibit lower levels of self-esteem when compared to individuals who did not experience maltreatment.

Literature Review

Physical Neglect

- The inconsistencies in definitions of neglect and its subtypes create issues in developing a standardized definition and promotes a lack of consistency in research on neglect.
- Few studies exist that report the prevalence of neglect as a primary interest, as well as the long-term consequences of neglect.
- Estimates suggest that more than 1 in 17 children experienced some form of neglect in 2018, in which supervisory neglect was most common.
- Neglect can have prolonged detrimental effects on children's cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral development, their well-being, and increases their risk of developing mental health disorders, drug use problems, and suicidal attempts and ideation.

Self-Esteem

- Few studies exist that explore the relationship between child maltreatment and self-esteem, with virtually no studies available regarding physical neglect and self-esteem in children who are not in foster care.
- Generally, youth with poor self esteem attend fewer years of post-secondary information, are less likely to be employed a decade after graduation, and earn less on average.

Methods

Research Design

- The current study is a secondary data analysis of cross-sectional data collected by the *Longitudinal Pathways to Resilience in Maltreated Children* between 1997 and 2000.
- Year 3 and Year 4 follow-up assessment data was collected using in-home interviews of caregivers and interviews of the children at the summer camp.
- The current study utilized the Maltreatment Classification System (MCS) to determine which participants were survivors of neglect in either infancy, toddlerhood, or in preschool age, which resulted in a subsample size of 76 children out of the 168 maltreated children.
- The participants scores on the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI) were also used to gather information in relation to self-esteem outcomes.

Sample

- The initial sampling frame was gathered using participants from a previous one-year study.
- The core sample consisted of 300 children ages six through 12, in which 263 participated in Year 3 and 249 in Year 4.
- 63% of participants were male, with an average age of 9.38 years, and 59% identified as African American.
- Almost half of all caregivers reported currently receiving full public assistance, with an average household income of \$21,510.

Measures

Independent Variable: Physical Neglect

- The MCS specifies children's maltreatment history by indicating: (1) the maltreatment type, (2) the severity of maltreatment, (3) the frequency of maltreatment, (4) the developmental period in which the maltreatment occurred, (5) the number of court-ordered removals from the primary caregiver, and (6) the perpetrator of the maltreatment, and was applied to official child protective services records obtained through Monroe County's Department of Social Services.

Dependent Variable: Self-Esteem

- The SEI is a set of 58 likert questions that respondents answer as "Like me" or "Unlike me". The total self-esteem score from this measure can be used as an indicator of self-esteem and valuing of the self, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem.

For data analysis, IBM Statistics Packages for Social Science Version 28.0 was used.

Results

- The results yielded from the Spearman rho correlation analysis between physical neglect severity and self-esteem yielded a positive and statistically significant association, $r_s(243) = .19, p = .003$. The strength of the correlations was weak. The results gathered from the correlation analysis are displayed in Figure 1.
- A significant difference was found $t(241) = -2.03, p = .04$ between the mean self-esteem scores of those who did experience neglect in infancy ($M = 61.19, SD = 13.96$) to those who did not ($M = 56.85, SD = 13.84$), in that mean self-esteem scores were significantly higher for those who experienced neglect in infancy. The results gathered from the independent samples t-test are displayed in Figure 2.
- No significant difference was found $t(241) = -1.25, p = .21$ when comparing the mean score of self-esteem between those who experienced physical neglect in toddlerhood to those who did not.
- No significant difference was found $t(241) = -.219, p = .827$ when comparing the mean score of self-esteem between those who experienced physical neglect in preschool to those who did not.

Figure 1

Scatterplot of Correlation of Between Severity of Physical Neglect and Self Esteem

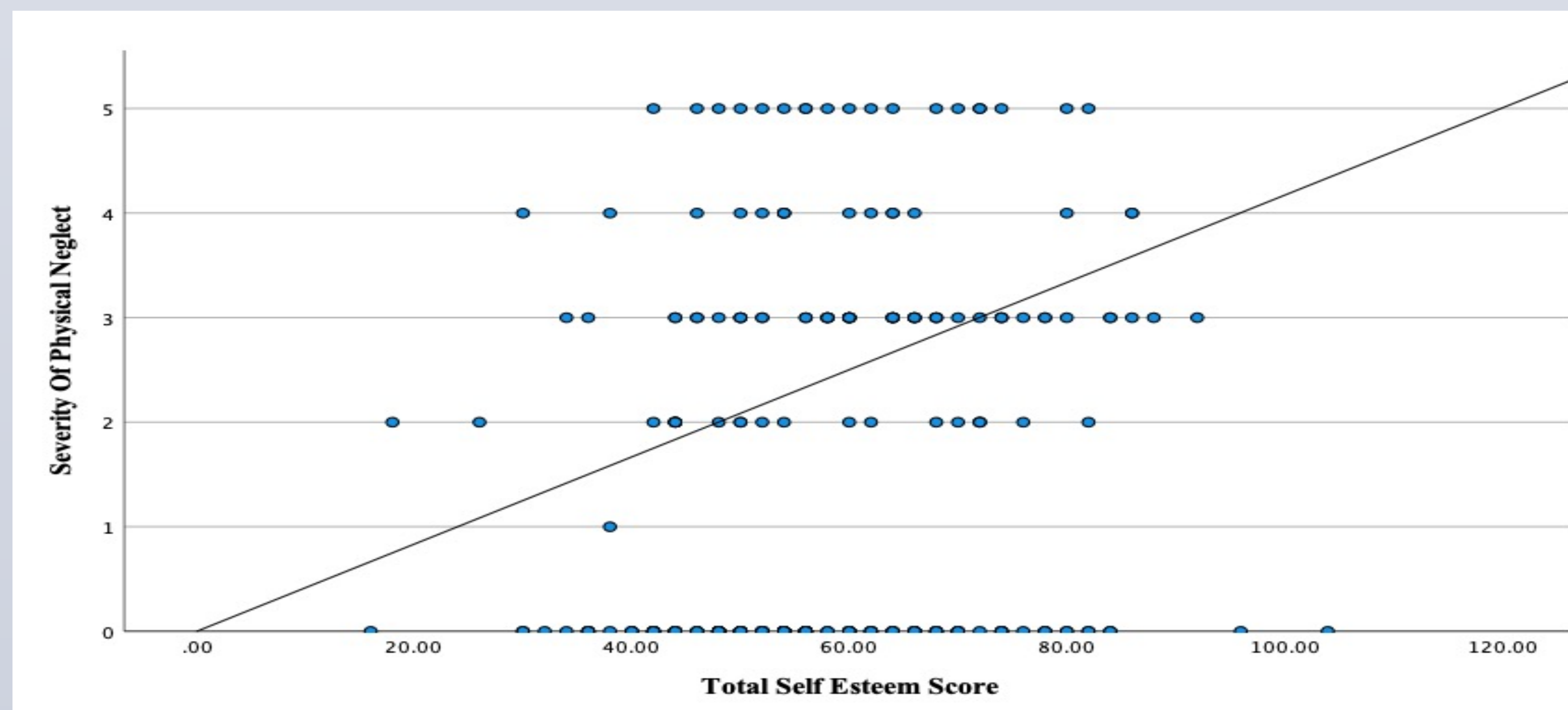
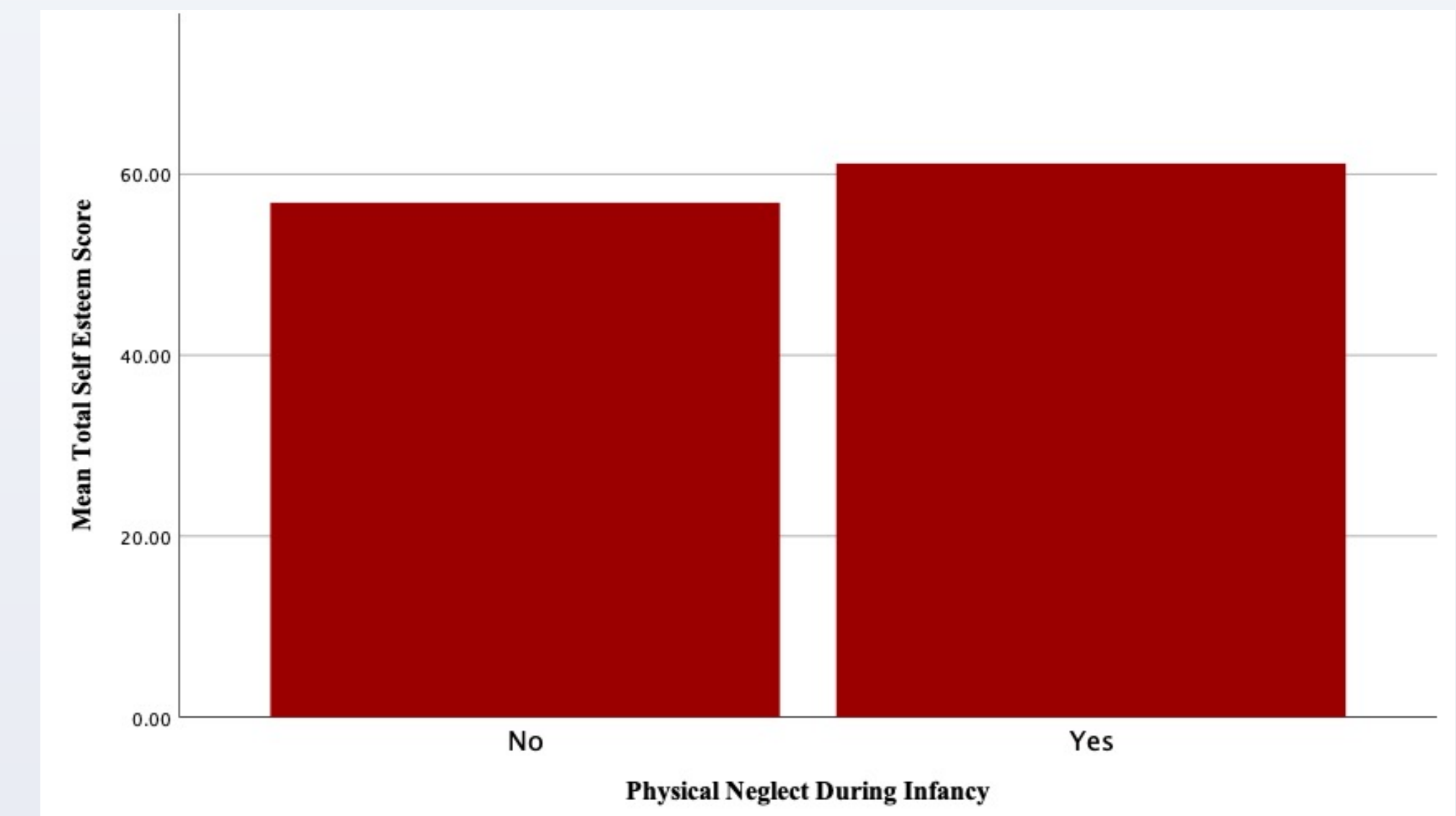


Figure 2

Bar Graph of Mean Differences in Self-esteem between Those with and without Physical Neglect in Infancy



Discussion

- The present study findings suggest that as physical neglect severity increases, so do levels of self-esteem. This study finding does not support the hypothesis and does not align with previous studies and theory on child maltreatment and self-esteem related variables (i.e., self-worth), which have found that experiences of maltreatment in childhood are detrimental to self-esteem levels in adulthood and have lasting negative effects in social and psychological domains.
- In the present study, those who experienced neglect in infancy had significantly different higher mean self-esteem scores to those who did not experience neglect. The study finding is not consistent with existing research on child maltreatment, which have found that young children between the ages of 0 and 5 are the most vulnerable to the effects of trauma because their brains are still in development.
- Although these finding were unanticipated, it is possible that external variables were not considered, most notably, high levels of resilience amongst the neglected children in the sample and protective factors in their environment. Literature supports the assumption that resilient children are able to cope better with experiences of maltreatment, and that protective factors in a child's environment at the time of the maltreatment, such as concrete support for parents in time of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social and emotional competence, influence a child's ability to "bounce back" from trauma.

Strengths and Limitations

- Use of a data set that systematically collected data on children who have experienced abuse.
- Adds to the limited literature examining neglect, self-esteem, and the relationship between them in children.

Implications & Future Research

- Incorporate self-esteem building activities into therapeutic settings, as well as in schools and daycares to prevent low self-esteem in children who have experienced adversity.
- Future research should focus on neglect and its subtypes, as well as study self-esteem levels amongst neglected children, as much of the available research have focused on maltreatment broadly, and have used retrospective adult accounts of maltreatment.