

# Research Brief:

Attitudes of Abused Children: Part 1: Do They Exhibit Behaviors that Enhance Attachments or Distance Attachments

Amy J.L. Baker and Steven G. Miller

# Two-Part Study

Collaboration between Amy Baker, Steven G. Miller and William Bernet.

With the assistance of Trinae Adebayo

Funded by the Steel Partners Foundation

Purpose is to document the attitudes and behaviors of abused children towards their abusive caregiver.

# Research Questions: Study Part 1

Would clinicians rate physically abused children as exhibiting behaviors that are “attachment-enhancing” or “attachment-distancing” from the abusive caregiver?

# Study Methods: The Sample

Two samples of clinicians were used:

1. Clinicians providing therapy to children removed from home due to abuse and neglect.
2. Clinicians listed as being trained in TF-CBT and who confirmed in screening survey that they have experience working with physically abused children.
3. 80% response rate, resulting in 338 clinicians.

# Study Methods: The Survey

In addition to questions about the participants, we asked each participant to answer 18 items about the attitudes and behaviors of their child clients towards their caregiver.

Nine items were “attachment-enhancing” such as “worried about the feelings of the parent”, “blames self for the abuse”, and “recalled positive memories of the caregiver.”

Nine items were “attachment-distancing” such as “Refused contact with the caregiver,” “held persistently negative view of the caregiver,” and “idolized the other parent.”

# Study Methods: The Survey

Four versions of the survey: The clinician is asked to rate....

1. A specific severely physically abused child.
2. A specific moderately physically abused child.
3. Severely physically abused children in general.
4. Moderately physically abused children in general.

# Study 1: Findings

Two scales were created:

- (1) Sum of 9 attachment-enhancing items (AE), alpha = .78
- (2) Sum of 9 attachment-distancing items (AD) alpha = .68.

# Study 1: Findings

Four paired t-tests to see whether within each sample the rates of AE would be statistically higher than rates of AD:

	Mean AE	Mean AD	t
Severely Abused Specific	19.6 (5.2)	11.5 (4.2)	9.5 ***
Moderately abused Specific	18.5 (5.6)	12.7 (4.5)	7.3 ***
Severely Abused in General	21.7 (3.4)	13.9 (3.6)	14.0***
Moderately Abused in General	21.3 (3.3)	14.7 (3.3)	12.3***

# Study 1: Findings

A difference score was created by subtracting the AD from the AE scores.

Positive score means more AE than AD 83.6%

Negative score means more AD than AE 12.7%

Score of 0 – no difference between AD and AE 03.6%

# Study 1: Findings

No statistical difference between the ratings of the severely and moderately abused children.

There were differences in the ratings of general versus the specific children, with ratings of children “in general” higher than ratings of a specific child for both AD and AE behaviors. Children in general seen as more extreme than a specific child.

# Study 1: Implications

- Clinicians can share these findings with abused children to help normalize the experience of wanting to stay connected to a parent who has hurt them.
- Understanding that we as humans are hard-wired to form and maintain attachments – even to abusive parents – can help child clients process their own emotions and experiences.
- Clinicians can anticipate that child clients who have been abused are likely to minimize the pain caused to them and to blame themselves for the abuse.

# Study 1: Implications

- Clinicians can help children develop balanced and reality-based experiences of both parents.
- Clinicians can help abusive parents not take advantage of the child's minimization as part of their work in accepting what they have done and developing less destructive parenting strategies.