

# Where We've Been and May Go, Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

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## Keywords

child maltreatment, prevention, experimental/analog studies, intervention research

*Child Maltreatment* (CM) has published 25 volumes, and this issue marks the first issue of the 26th. The last 25 years have seen progress regarding our understanding of the scope, causes, and consequences of maltreatment and its prevention. The number of published articles in CM has grown, and the last 5 years have seen increases in the number of submissions, decreases in the acceptance rate, and increases in the Impact Factor (Figure 1). It is important at this stage of development (young adulthood?) to review where we have been and where we may go over the next 5 years.

## Where We Have Been

Since its inception, CM has published high quality empirical articles that have achieved great prominence. One only has to look at our “Article of the Year” to understand this. These articles, voted on by the editorial board, are landmarks that highlight important findings in the field. Over the past 5 years, they have ranged from evidence-based service planning guidelines for child welfare (Berliner, Fitzgerald, et al., 2015), to developmental outcomes in foster care children (Goemans et al., 2016), to prevention using the Nurse Family Partnership (Eckenrode et al., 2017), to AF-CBT in high risk populations (Kolko et al., 2018), to trauma informed care in a state child welfare system (Jankowski et al., 2019). All of these and more have become standard references.

CM's special issues during the past 5 years have focused on timely themes with articles that tease out emerging ideas. Trauma-informed care (Hanson & Lang, 2016), new technology (Baggett & Self-Brown, 2017), and neurobiological implications of maltreatment (Gonzalez & Oshri, 2019) were topics that showed the impact an academic journal can have on sharing our understanding and responding to real problems. Journals like CM have disseminated evidence-based practices to treat child trauma, improve parenting, address sexual behavior problems, and improve foster care. We have helped governments and communities successfully adopt and implement best practices.

CM has made a difference in academia as well. Its Impact Factor (IF) is now 2.9, making CM the second most cited journal in Social Work and the fifth in Family Studies

according to the 2019 Journal Citation Reports® (JCR) published by Thomson Reuters. IF is a primary metric used by researchers, librarians, promotion and tenure committees, and others to evaluate the importance of a scientific journal as evidenced by citations. It is calculated as the average number of citations over a 2-year period for each article in a journal. CM's IF is a strong indicator that researchers are turning to CM to inform and guide their work and are acknowledging its importance to the advancement of the field.

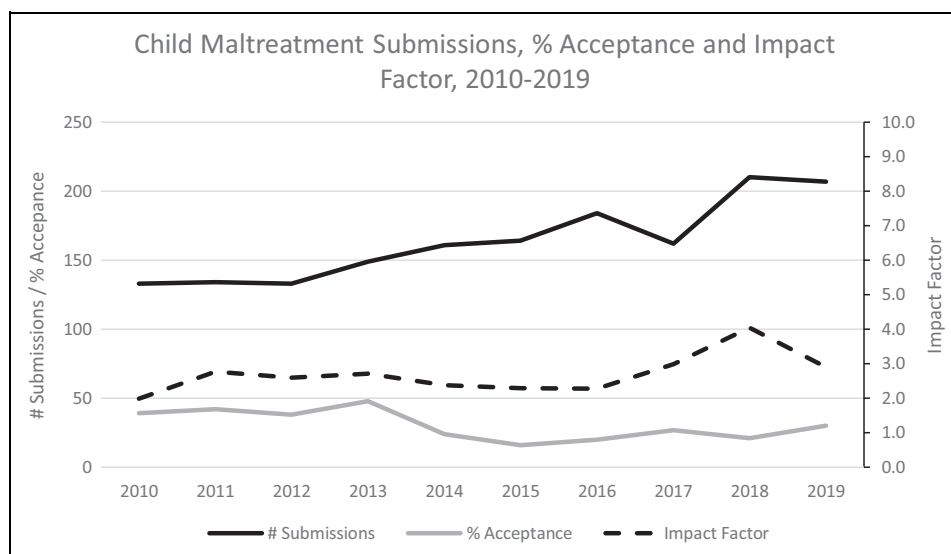
Historically, CM was conceived as the official journal of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children to provide its members with an outlet for in-depth rigorous empirical research and to keep them informed on the latest findings relevant to their work. In the inaugural issue, Mark Chaffin and Theresa Reid (1996) articulated a number of goals for CM that would serve as guiding principles. These goals were: (1) taking a rigorous data-based approach to understanding a broad range of issues related to child maltreatment, (2) encouraging interdisciplinary responses to maltreatment including interdisciplinary research, (3) attending to issues of culture and diversity in the study of maltreatment, and (4) looking at the big picture of child maltreatment research to develop a vision for advancing prevention and intervention efforts.

Steven Ondersma reaffirmed this dedication in 2005, noting that CM had successfully pursued all of these goals with articles focusing broadly on all topics and disciplines within child maltreatment, addressing issues of diversity, and providing careful syntheses of both the field and specific practices within it (Ondersma, 2005). He noted that each of these goals appeared to be at least as relevant then as in 1996, and we must “stay the course” (p. 4). Candice Feiring reiterated in 2010 that the mission of CM remained focused on providing rigorous data-based approaches to the understanding, treatment and prevention of child maltreatment, and she intended to build on the

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**Figure 1.** CM submissions, impact factor, and % acceptance rate, by year, 2010–2019.

major goals articulated by (Chaffin & Reid, 1996 by emphasizing a data-based approach to understanding the antecedents, consequences, prevention, and treatment of child abuse and neglect, addressing a broad range of problems and integrated multidisciplinary responses, paying attention to cultural issues, and encouraging work that examines the “big picture” and provides a coherent vision of current knowledge and future directions (Feiring, 2010, p. 3). Dan Whitaker expanded these goals by focusing on innovative but rigorous research that is appropriately contextualized and relevant to real-world problems with even greater diversity in CM’s authorship and paying attention to culture and to study designs that maximize the confidence that the observed effects were due to the hypothesized causes and generalizable to real-world settings with a focus on practice in North America (Whitaker, 2015). Even then he noted: “The focus on culture is perhaps even more important now than ever” and challenged CM to “not shy away from controversial topics in child maltreatment research and practice” (p. 4).

Until this year, rates of child maltreatment were on the decline in the U.S., and we thought we were all making a difference. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the world. Coupled with economic recession and increasing recognition of the systemic racial bias in governments and institutions, children and families were perhaps forever changed by lockdowns, closed schools, food and housing insecurity, anxiety, stress and a deterioration in mental and physical health resources that revealed and expanded the disparities faced by too many in our communities.

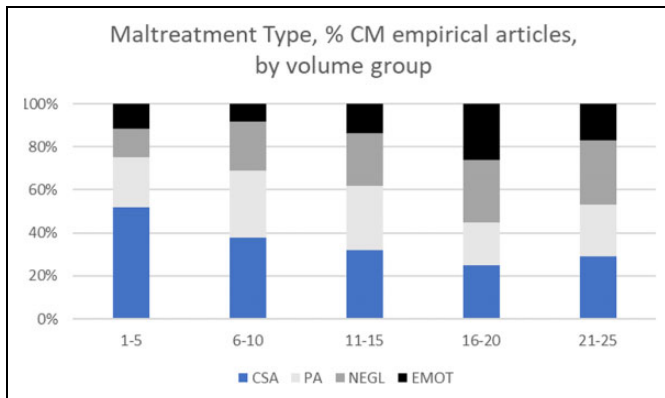
So there is more to do.

## Where We May Go

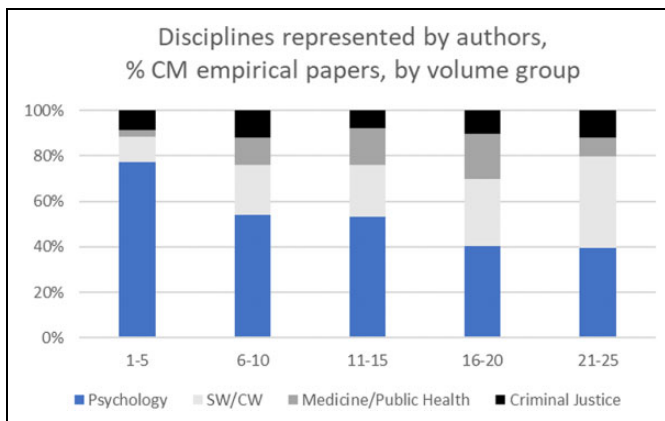
In 2011, Feiring and Zielinski (2011) noted increasing numbers of empirical articles being published in CM that they called “an

important indicator of the growth of CM from a new to an established journal” (p. 3). To study CM’s direction during its first 15 years, they coded all empirical articles for the types of abuse and neglect, methodology, statistics, disciplines of authors, and published analyses of the methods used and outcomes reported (Feiring & Zielinski, 2011). When I extended some of Feiring and Zielinski’s analyses, it became apparent that the proportion of articles addressing neglect and emotional abuse/psychological maltreatment has increased, with recent decreases in physical abuse and a resurgence of sexual abuse (Figure 2). The proportion of authors from psychology declined in CM with a concomitant increase in authors from other fields such as social work, child welfare, medicine, public health and law (Figure 3). These trends bode well for meeting our commitments to be multidisciplinary and to address real-world issues. They differ from *medical* articles in the literature overall where we found that the primary type of maltreatment was different, focusing on physical abuse, followed by multiple types, sexual abuse, and neglect (Palusci & Perfetto, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racism in our society and child welfare systems were not on the radar when CM began. While the terms may be controversial, children with maltreatment due to poverty, religious practices and racism suffer more yet receive fewer services and resources (Palusci et al., 2018). Disproportionate numbers of African American children and other racial/ethnic groups have found themselves in the child welfare system (Maguire-Jack et al., 2015), and this applies to Native American children as well (Graves, 2013). Racism is a core social determinant of health that is a driver of health inequities with health effects similar to, if not greater than, traditional adverse childhood experiences (Trent et al., 2019). Bias has been recognized within the medical community since the 1970s, and it has been suggested that it accounts for at least some of these effects since it can result in significant diagnostic errors that lead to CM reporting (Hall et al.,



**Figure 2.** Maltreatment type, Percent of CM empirical articles, by volume. Note. Primary type of maltreatment examined. CSA = childhood sexual abuse; PA = physical abuse; NEGL = neglect; EMOT = emotional abuse. Data for volumes 1–15 derived from Feiring and Zielinski (2011).



**Figure 3.** Author discipline, % CM empirical articles, by 5 year period. Note. SW/CW = Social work or Child Welfare. Data for volumes 1–15 derived from Feiring and Zielinski (2011).

2015). When reported to CPS, African American children are more likely to be screened in, confirmed, and brought to court (Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020). Racism affects not only the children reported to CPS but also how they receive prevention services (Beaulieu et al., 2020). While the epidemiology will need years of study, there are concerns about increases in child maltreatment as a result of COVID-19, which we know affects populations inequitably (Sidpra et al., 2020). CM should extend these lines of inquiry and rigorously evaluate these issues.

Let us be clear from the outset. **CM and APSAC believe it is essential to the future of our society that we eliminate racism and implicit bias** (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2020a). Furthermore, CM, as a peer-reviewed journal with empirical research, must encourage articles using appropriately diverse study populations to obtain optimal external validity and generalizability. It's not enough to study racial differences by themselves in maltreatment rates, causes, and consequences; we need to get at the source of those differences to understand and respond to what has been and is

going on, and we need to attract a diverse group of authors to give us diverse perspectives.

The last great pandemic and the horrors of world wars and the Great Depression were followed by the recognition and response to child abuse and neglect in the U.S. (Palusci, 2017). Perhaps this pandemic offers similar opportunities to better understand and address these adversities (Roubinov et al., 2020). Many are thinking about how the current pandemic will change medical and child welfare systems (Fuchs, 2020; Greeley, 2020; Jones & Klika, 2020). Fortunately (or unfortunately) the direction of the journal is likely to be influenced by these historical events. As of this writing, the eventual outcome of the pandemic is hopeful but unclear. Will society use this opportunity to eradicate systemic racism? Will our institutions and professions use this experience to provide the resources and to begin to apply what we already know to eliminate child abuse and neglect and to develop new systems and responses that can address the inequities and suffering?

Like the field, my early work looked at medical and forensic issues in physical and sexual abuse, but I now use epidemiology and administrative data to study diagnosis, reporting, recurrence, fatality, and prevention (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, 2010; Bearup & Palusci, 1999; Greiner et al., 2013; Kennedy et al., 2020; Palusci et al., 2019; Palusci et al., 2001; Palusci & Ilardi, 2020; Palusci & Ondersma, 2012; Palusci & Reeves, 2003; Palusci et al., 2016; Roygardner et al., 2020). We will also need to pay attention to new technology and other emerging areas (Siegel & Palusci, 2019). Understanding the effects of COVID-19 and whether stress will increase, or gains in empathy will decrease, child maltreatment compel extended study. The role of fathers and the changing patriarchy in the U.S. need to be integrated into how we approach *families*, not just *mothers* (Fuchs, 2000; Kobulsky et al., 2020). It turns out that economic support *raises all boats* to reduce child abuse and neglect (Fortson et al., 2016), and we need to understand more about the relationship of child maltreatment to systemic *inequities* in food and housing insecurity and inadequate medical care as well as systemic *racism*. Translating this knowledge into policy and practice should be a focus of our work for years to come.

Given that we already know so much about how and why child abuse and neglect occur, it is time to adequately fund, implement and evaluate prevention across maltreatment types and populations. While the evidence base for home visiting is strong and nearly all the effective programs are home visiting models, its use and funding are uneven (Eckenrode et al., 2017). *No Hit Zones* start a different community discussion by addressing corporal punishment, which affects the parent-child relationship beyond the potential for physical abuse (LeBlanc et al., 2019). What's old is new again as we consider broad community-based strategies such as *Prevention Zones* (Roygardner et al., 2020). I believe we are entering a time for what is referred to as a “precision-based, personalized framework for prevention” (or what I call *precision prevention*) where we can tailor our strategies to an individual's risk profiles and genetics (August & Gewirtz, 2019). Modeled after

*precision medicine*, this is an emerging approach for prevention “that takes into account individual variability in genes, environment, and lifestyle for each person” in a way similar to medicine (Genetics Home Reference, n.d.). In this model, genetic profiles are not used to withhold treatment or interventions but instead to help identify potential responsivity to prevention and select the strategies that should be used. It is no surprise that families’ experiences shape how they respond to prevention strategies, exemplified by interventions for conduct disorders and abusive head trauma (Clemens et al., 2020; Glenn et al., 2019). We need to use our knowledge about risk and protective factors to create individualized services addressing all the forms of child abuse and neglect. This goes beyond CPS statistical risk assessments and referrals to existing services aimed at preventing CPS reports. CM will need to provide a forum for studies of implicit and explicit bias in our academic systems as well as our child welfare and health systems (Yancy, 2020).

I propose taking steps that will further increase the number and quality of submissions, reviewers, and readership. We need to continue to include more practitioners from multiple professions and disciplines as authors, with more attention to neglect and emerging issues in the field. We need to grow future editors and reviewers and to increase Editorial Board involvement with CM and APSAC. This means making CM more author and reviewer-friendly as well as making the editorial board and APSAC more interactive and supportive. I am hoping we can have more meetings with the Editorial Board, Associate Editors, and Student Editors for a variety of reasons, such as enhancing editor and reviewer skills, knowledge dissemination, and practice improvement across academic and practice realms. We need to explore providing more professional development and networking opportunities for CM editors, especially our students. Sage Publications is a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics, and CM has pledged to adhere to COPE guidelines (Committee on Publication Ethics, n.d.). In addition to working on content related to COVID-19 (and the issues associated with rapid review), we will also focus our attention on invited commentaries and special issues to translate our content to practice, explicate broad issues within the big picture, and show how to implement this knowledge. We need to work more with APSAC, the *APSAC Advisor* and *Alert*, the APSAC Center for Child Policy, and other organizations. CM’s planned special issue on the intersection of intimate partner violence and child maltreatment is a good example of where we need to go.

## Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

Forgive me for paraphrasing Sir Isaac Newton (1675), Bernard of Chartres and theologian John of Salisbury: *If we have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of Giants*. APSAC members and CM contributors have been giants in the field. While some have left us, such as David Chadwick (APSAC, 2020b) and Mark Chaffin (Berliner, Bonner, et al., 2015), we have still have many among us and the

privilege of their vision as we continue our journey. Standing on their shoulders, we can see further, travel farther and go more safely along the way.

I am honored to have been named the fifth Editor-in-Chief of CM. My goals as editor are to continue to move CM in its current directions and to grow it as a respected and desirable outlet for the best research on child maltreatment. Not only are there broad shoulders to stand on, there are big shoes to fill. As did all the prior CM editors, I invite members of APSAC and readers to share their ideas as we address the challenges ahead. Your support of CM as academics, researchers, practitioners, policy makers, authors, reviewers, and readers continues to make the journal a major resource for professionals in the field. Share your ideas for the direction of the journal. What areas do we need more focus on? Are there ideas for special issues we should develop? Are there problems with the editorial process we can fix? All journals need good reviews and reviewers, and I want to focus on developing the next generation of authors, reviewers and editors while expanding the roles of those who have traditionally been underrepresented in academics and on editorial boards. Lastly, I want to thank APSAC and the Publications Committee for the opportunity to take this on, and I especially want to thank Dan Whitaker and Bri Stormer for the hours they have spent helping me with the transition.

There is amazing stuff going on here. On to Volume 26!

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