Staying ahead of child abuse
An evaluation of preventive efforts
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CHAPTER 8

General discussion
Child abuse is a major problem that affects many children around the world and has serious consequences for individual victims and society. Given the high prevalence rates of child abuse and the serious short-term and long-term negative effects on children's well-being, effective prevention of child abuse is essential. Worldwide, many programs have been designed to prevent child abuse. However, review studies on the effectiveness of preventive interventions for child abuse generally found only small overall effects of these interventions (e.g., Euser et al., 2015; Filene et al., 2013; Van der Put et al., 2018). Therefore, the aim of this dissertation was to enhance knowledge on what can be done to strengthen preventive efforts to stay ahead of child abuse. In pursuing this aim, six studies were conducted that together form the present dissertation. This final chapter highlights the main findings of these studies, discusses the strengths and limitations, and describes implications for clinical practice as well as directions for future research.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

**Components Associated With the Effectiveness of Parent Training Programs**

In the first study of this dissertation (Chapter 2), a three-level meta-analysis was conducted to assess what components and techniques of parent training programs for preventing or reducing child abuse are associated with program effectiveness. A small significant overall effect was found, meaning that parent training programs can prevent or reduce child abuse to a small extent. No significant moderating effects were found for most of the examined program components and techniques. This suggests that the different program components and techniques used in parent training programs are about equally effective in preventing or reducing child abuse. Only a few program components moderated program effectiveness, but programs build upon these components and techniques showed significantly smaller overall effects on child abuse. Given these results, we concluded that improving parental personal skills, improving problem solving skills, and stimulating children's prosocial behavior should not be the main focus of parental training programs.

**Components Associated With the Effectiveness of Home Visiting Programs**

The second study (Chapter 3) aimed to increase knowledge on how program components are related to the effectiveness of home visiting programs for preventing or reducing...
child abuse. A small but significant overall effect was found, suggesting that home visiting programs can prevent or reduce child abuse to a small extent. The findings suggest that program effectiveness can be improved by implementing specific program components and techniques. Specifically, programs that focus on improving parental expectations of the child or parenthood in general, programs improving parental responsiveness or sensitivity to a child’s needs, and programs using video-recordings of parent-child interactions during the home visits showed larger effects. Providing practical and instrumental assistance to address the families’ basis needs (e.g., transportation services, respite or child care) was negatively associated with program effectiveness.

**Effective Components of School-Based Prevention Programs for Child Abuse**

The third study (Chapter 4) examined the effect of school-based prevention programs on two outcomes, namely (1) child abuse-related knowledge and (2) children’s self-protection skills (including abuse disclosure), by performing a separate meta-analysis for each outcome. Furthermore, moderator analyses were performed to identify how program components and delivery techniques are associated with program effectiveness. School-based child abuse prevention programs yielded a significant effect on both children’s knowledge of child abuse and self-protection skills. The results of the first meta-analysis on children’s child abuse knowledge suggest that program effects are larger when social-emotional skills of children are improved and self-blame is addressed, and when puppets and games or quizzes are used as a delivery technique in the program lessons. The second meta-analysis on children’s self-protections skills revealed that none of the tested individual components and techniques are associated with increased effectiveness, indicating that they are about equally effective in increasing children’s self-protections skills.

**Perspectives of Young Child Abuse Survivors on School-Based Child Abuse Prevention**

The aim of the fourth study (Chapter 5) was to explore the perspectives of young child abuse survivors on how school-based child abuse prevention programs should be shaped and what program components are essential for effectively preventing the occurrence or recurrence of child abuse. The young child abuse survivors suggested that school-based child abuse prevention programs are very important, especially for increasing children’s awareness of abuse in the (family) situation of their own or their
peers. In shaping future school-based programs, or in improving existing programs, the young child abuse survivors suggested that several components are essential: teaching children that they are never to blame for abusive situations, and providing information about where they can find help in potential abusive situations. Finally, young child abuse survivors emphasize the importance of providing children with adequate aftercare when school-based prevention programs end.

**Detecting and Reporting Child Abuse by Professionals**

The fifth study (Chapter 6) examined experiences, attitudes, perspectives, and decision-making skills of professionals in child health care, mental health care, and schools, that are important in identifying and reporting child abuse. A further aim was to gain insight into how detection and reporting of child abuse can be improved. Many professionals believe they miss child abuse signs in their daily work, partially due to an insufficient focus on child abuse in their interactions with children. Professionals indicated having insufficient knowledge of child abuse, and lacking communication skills to detect or discuss signs that are indicative of child abuse in interactions with parents or children. Professionals barely use structured instruments even though these are regarded as very helpful in the decision-making process. Further, professionals experience deficits in the cooperation with child welfare organizations, and in particular with Child Protective Services (CPS).

**Long-Term Child Abuse Outcomes of Early Childhood Interventions**

The sixth study (Chapter 7) explored the potential of using administrative data on outcomes related to child abuse in evaluating long-term benefits of preventive early childhood interventions. This study describes the process of accessing and using administrative data from Statistics Netherlands in examining the long-term benefits of three preventive early childhood interventions: Supportive Parenting, VoorZorg, and Incredible Years. The assessed outcomes were incidences of child protection orders, number of children placed in residential child care, registrations of crime victimization, and registrations of parent(s) as a suspect of a crime. No evidence was found for differences on these outcomes between families that did and families that did not participate in one of the three examined preventive early childhood interventions. However, these findings must be interpreted with caution due to some methodological issues, of which small sample sizes and low prevalences of the outcomes measures are the most important. Although using administrative data has limitations, the benefits can outweigh the downsides, in
particular compared to other sources of information that may be used in effectiveness studies. Administrative data provide the opportunity to explore long-term intervention effects in an efficient, accessible, and time-consuming way, and research using these data substantially contributes to knowledge on the best available evidence.

**DISCUSSION OF MAIN FINDINGS**

Taking into account the results of these six studies, this dissertation contributes importantly to knowledge on what can be done to stay ahead of child abuse. The findings suggest that parent training programs and home visiting programs may be effective in preventing child abuse (Chapter 2 and 3), and that school-based prevention programs may decrease the risk of child abuse by providing children abuse-related knowledge, making them more aware of abusive situations, and providing them with self-protection skills (Chapter 4 and 5). These three types of preventive interventions should therefore be considered in prevention strategies to stay ahead of child abuse. Furthermore, the results of the studies in Chapter 2, 3, 4, and 5 indicate that the effectiveness of some of these preventive interventions may be improved by implementing specific program components and delivery techniques. Most of the program components and delivery techniques that were examined in the three meta-analytic reviews did not significantly moderate the overall effects. This suggests that most components and techniques are about equally effective in preventing or reducing child abuse, or in reducing the risk of child abuse. Potentially, these components and techniques are particularly effective in interaction with each other, or grouping more intervention components together leads to larger program effects. The latter would imply that the notion that “more is more” holds for child abuse preventive interventions. This notion is partially supported by the results of the meta-analysis described in Chapter 3, revealing that the more parenting-related components are addressed in home visiting programs, the more effective these programs are. Future research should investigate combinations of components or techniques (see also “Strengths and limitations”).

The findings of this dissertation also showed that, although detecting and reporting child abuse is considered very important by child professionals in the Netherland, several barriers stand in the way of an optimal detection and reporting. Early detection is essential for effectively preventing child abuse, as detection provides the opportunity to deliver preventive services to right (at-risk) families at the appropriate time. The findings of the study presented in Chapter 6 reveal that child professionals in the Netherlands
often miss signs of child abuse, partially due to a lack of focus on child abuse. Further, professionals indicated having insufficient knowledge of child abuse, and lack communication skills to detect or discuss signs indicative of child abuse in conversations with parents or children. The fact that the findings were largely in line with those of Schols et al. (2013), who studied professional's detecting and reporting behaviors prior to the implementation of the mandatory reporting guidelines (Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, 2013), suggests that the detecting and reporting behaviors of professionals have barely changed. Improvements to overcome barriers in child abuse detection and reporting could be reached in different ways, including the development of safety or risk assessment tools (see, for instance, Vial et al., 2021) and improvement of pre-service and in-service training of professionals about signs of child abuse.

Finally, there is a general lack of knowledge on long-term benefits of preventive interventions. Literature shows that only a few child abuse interventions have been investigated for their long-term effectiveness (Euser et al., 2015; Van der Put et al., 2018). Furthermore, the results of the meta-analysis described in Chapter 3 suggest that home visiting programs show larger effects at later follow-up evaluations, and that effects on child abuse may emerge only after two years. This is in line with the findings of Van der Put et al. (2018), who also found larger positive effects of preventive child abuse interventions at later follow-up assessments. The effects of preventive early childhood interventions may thus be particularly expressed in follow-up rather than in post-treatment evaluations. Therefore, it is crucial to gain knowledge on long-term benefits of these interventions. The findings described in Chapter 7 indicate that administrative child welfare data can be useful in evaluating long-term benefits of preventive interventions for child abuse.

**STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

This dissertation has some important limitations that need to be mentioned. The first limitation is related to the way child abuse is measured in the studies of this dissertation. For example, in the meta-analyses described in Chapter 2 and 3, primary studies were included reporting on outcomes such as official reports of child abuse, investigations, or a recurrence in child protection. However, previous literature suggested that most abuse occurrences are not reported to official child protection authorities (Cyr er al., 2013; Finkelhor et al., 2005; 2009). Therefore, studies using these outcomes may not fully capture all actual instances of child abuse. Further, primary studies included in the
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meta-analyses of this dissertation reported on proxies of child abuse, such as harsh parenting and parental aggression. Although literature points to a strong association between these proxies and child abuse (Gill, 1973; Kadushin & Martin, 1981; Knox, 2010; Straus, 2000), they cannot be regarded as true instances of child abuse according to the common definitions of child abuse. Also in the explorative study described in Chapter 7, administrative data on proxies of child abuse were used (i.e., incidences of child protection orders) rather than variables that directly represent (numbers of) child abuse episodes. Future research should focus on examining variables that are more indicative of actual child abuse, although this might be challenging due to high costs and ethical issues (International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2016).

A second limitation is related to how the effectiveness of individual program components and techniques were examined. The findings of the studies described in Chapter 2, 3, and 4 shed light on which specific (content) components and techniques are uniquely associated with the overall program effectiveness of different types of preventive interventions for child abuse. Generally, the results revealed that implementing or eliminating specific components or techniques can improve program effectiveness. However, no conclusions can be drawn on the interactions between program components, or between components and other characteristics of the program or target group, as these were not examined in the reviews that are part of this dissertation. Future research should therefore investigate the moderating effect of combinations of components and/or characteristics and their potential cumulative effects, for example in a network meta-analysis (see, for instance, Leijten et al., 2021a).

Despite these limitations, the studies forming this dissertation have important (methodological) strengths. The meta-analytic reviews described in Chapter 2, 3, and 4 break new ground, since they are the first to provide a systematic, quantitative summary of the program components and techniques that are central to three specific types of preventive interventions for child abuse, which are parenting training programs, home visiting programs, and school-based prevention programs. These studies are the first three-level meta-analyses of their kind. A major advantage of this three-level approach to meta-analysis is that all relevant effects reported in each primary study can be included, implying that all relevant information is preserved. As a result, no information is lost and (moderator) effects can be estimated more precisely, and with maximum statistical power (Assink & Wibbelink, 2016).

Another strength of this dissertation is that two research methods were used to examine how school-based child prevention programs should be shaped, and which program components are associated with their effectiveness. The results of the meta-
analytic review described in Chapter 4 were partially used to formulate the research questions of the qualitative research described in Chapter 5. Specifically, the list of program components that were coded in the meta-analysis was used to partly guide the interviews with the young child abuse survivors. It was found that components positively associated with the effectiveness of school programs according to the meta-analysis were also valued by the young child abuse survivors. Using multiple research methods (also referred to as mixed methods research) researchers can explore more divergent viewpoints on the same topic, and may obtain a more comprehensive picture of a problem in practice as well as contextual understandings that are shaped by real-life experiences (Greene, 2007; Morse & Niehaus, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

The studies in this dissertation provide important knowledge for practice. We found that the three types of interventions that were investigated in this dissertation all proved to be potentially effective in preventing child abuse or reducing the risk of child abuse. Therefore, these programs should be considered by clinical professionals and policy makers in choosing an appropriate intervention to prevent or reduce child abuse. This is especially important since not all intervention types investigated in this dissertation have been broadly implemented. For example, the results of the study described in Chapter 5 and results of previous research (Gubbels et al. 2021a; World Health Organization 2014, 2018) indicate a lack of child abuse prevention strategies in Dutch schools. The positive and medium-sized effects of school programs that were found in this dissertation ($d = 0.572$ for children’s knowledge and $d = 0.528$ for self-protection skills) indicate that schools in the Netherlands may consider to implement child abuse prevention or education programs more often. Notably, the findings of this dissertation do represent a call for future research on the effects of school-based programs in secondary education. In the meta-analysis described in Chapter 4 only one primary study could be included that examined the effects of a school-based child abuse prevention program for specifically high school students.

The findings of the current dissertation provide important implications for the improvement of currently available home visiting programs and school-based child abuse prevention programs. Chapter 3 suggests that home visiting programs for preventing child abuse could be improved by focusing on parental responsiveness or sensitivity to the child’s needs, improving parental expectations of parenthood, and using
video-based feedback during home visits. These findings can also be used in developing new (promising) home visiting programs that comprise the most effective components. The findings described in Chapter 4 and 5 indicate that current or newly developed school-based child abuse prevention programs could be enhanced by focusing on social-emotional skills of children, teaching children that child abuse is never their fault, and by using puppets and games as delivery techniques in program lessons. For parent training programs, none of the examined program components or techniques were associated with increased effects on child abuse (Chapter 2). However, the results described in Chapter 2 indicate that improving parental personal skills, improving problem solving skills, and stimulating children’s prosocial behavior should not be the main focus of parental training programs. It may be that these components are less directly related to child abuse, and thus negatively associated with program effectiveness. As parent training programs are often relatively short in duration, programs mainly build around these components may address parenting issues or the parent-child relationship only to a small extent or even not at all even though these factors are important predictors of child abuse (Assink et al., 2019; Mulder et al., 2018; Stith et al., 2009).

Integrating effective components in current or new preventive programs for child abuse is especially important since these effective components were often not part of the programs included in the meta-analyses in this dissertation. For example, the home visiting programs that were synthesized in Chapter 3 hardly addressed parental expectations of their child or parenthood in general (this could only be coded for 11.5 % of the effect sizes) or used video-based feedback during home visits (coded for only 3.4 % of effect sizes). On the other hand, the components that were negatively associated with the overall effectiveness of preventive interventions did occur quite regularly. For example, providing practical or instrumental assistance was coded for 27 % of the effect sizes that were analyzed in the home visiting meta-analysis (Chapter 3), and 65 % of the effect sizes analyzed in the parent training meta-analysis were related to improving parental problem-solving skills (see Chapter 2). ‘

**FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Research into what can be done to strengthen preventive efforts to stay ahead of child abuse is highly relevant and a number of future directions can be pursued for further improvement of these efforts. First, in Chapter 2, 3, and 5 a meta-analytic approach was used to synthesize findings of previous research to examine the effects of preventive...
interventions for child abuse, and assess whether their success is associated with the presence or absence of specific intervention component or delivery techniques. An important next step in effective component research is assessing the effect of combinations of components, or the interaction between individual intervention components. Furthermore, to strengthen the evidence around effective components of child abuse prevention programs, several other research strategies are available that could be used in future research, including microtrials (i.e., examining the effect of individual components), additive/dismantling studies (i.e., examining the effect of implementing a complete intervention with the target component versus the intervention without the target component), or factorial experiments (i.e., examining the single, additive, or combined effects of components by randomly assigning participants to receive any possible combination of the target components; Leijten et al., 2021b).

Future research should also examine the implementation of components that were found to be associated to the effectiveness of preventive intervention in clinical practice. In the current dissertation, this was done to a small extent by involving young child abuse survivors in our research and ask them about their views on school-based child abuse prevention and their most essential components. In addition to this, professionals who carry out preventive interventions should also be included in research to gain knowledge on which components they view as essential and whether their view matches with the components that were proven to be effective in this dissertation.

Another future line of research could focus on preventing child abuse through community-based interventions. The research of this dissertation focused on preventing child abuse through targeting at-risk or maltreating parents (Chapter 2, 3 and 7), a general population of children in the school context (Chapter 4 and 5), and health and education professionals working with children (Chapter 6). However, there was no focus on a wider social context of the family, such as the neighborhood or community in which the family lives. Scientific literature showed that community-based interventions targeting neighborhood processes are promising, but empirical evidence is necessary to further develop promising community-based approaches for the prevention of child abuse (Van Dijken et al., 2016).
CONCLUSION

This dissertation is a step forward into understanding what can be done to stay ahead of child abuse. The findings underscore that improvements are needed to shape future preventive interventions, to detect and report child abuse, and to evaluate the long-term benefits of preventive interventions. An integrated governmental approach to the prevention of child abuse seems to be needed with attention for the context of the child, the family, the school, and the environment surrounding the child. Such approach is in line with the developmental-ecological view on the etiology of child abuse of Belsky (1980; 1993; Belsky & Jaffee, 2006), in which child abuse is multi-causally determined by different factors in parents (ontogenic development), the family (the microsystem), the community (the exosystem), and the culture (the macrosystem) in which both the parents and family are embedded. Finally, this dissertation can be placed in the tradition of the pioneering work of Baartman (1996), who emphasized that a parental lack of pedagogical awareness is a key explanatory factor for child abuse. This dissertation is an impetus to increase pedagogical awareness in society as a whole with a strong eye for the conditions under which children grow up at home, at school, and in their neighborhood. Above all, staying ahead of child abuse implies that society and its institutions should create conditions under which children can safely grow up and realize their full potential.