President’s Column

Section Thriving Despite Membership Decline

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Happy New Year to everyone in the Section on Child Maltreatment. The year 2007 was a good one for our Section and I look forward to another productive year. In order for the Section’s Executive Committee (EC) to communicate more regularly with each other and to stay on top of issues important to the Section, we have initiated conference calls that will take place every few months. These are in addition to the yearly EC meeting which takes place at the APA annual meeting.

In a previous column, I mentioned a concern about declining membership in the Section. In fact, the decline has been about 30% over the past five years. When this issue was discussed both at the Section’s EC meeting and Division 37’s EC meeting in San Francisco, several people mentioned that they were not sure if their membership in the Section had been renewed. This confusion mostly arises from the fact that membership dues for the Section are sent in a separate dues statement from the annual APA dues statement. People may forget that there are separate dues statements and think that once they paid their APA/Division dues that the Section’s dues were included, too.

To try to get to the root of this problem, we obtained Section membership lists for 2006 and 2007 from the APA Division Services Office. We then discovered that even a few members of the Section’s EC had not paid their 2007 membership dues. Our Section’s Membership Chair David Kolko is now reviewing these lists. In the near future, we hope to be able to send out notices to all Section members who have not renewed for 2007 and may not have been aware that they had not. Additionally, we hope to work with APA to determine if there might be a way to include the Section dues statement along with the annual APA dues notice.

Jane Silovsky (Member-at-Large of the EC whose term ended in December) reports that the new Internship Survey will be web-based and will hopefully be sent out by the end of February after prospective interns have matched with internship sites for this next academic year. It will be interesting to learn if additional internship sites are now including child maltreatment education, training, and clinical experiences as part of their curricula. A big thanks to Jane and her work group for moving this important project along.

As some of you may already know, the Section’s EC is working with APA to create a Section Listserv. The major purpose of the Listserv would be to communicate more regularly and more effectively with membership. The Listserv would be announcement only. We, of course, understand that many of you participate in Listservs and are regularly bombarded with way too much extraneous information that just clogs up your email. To try to insure that this does not happen with the Section’s Listserv, we plan to make the Listserv only available to Section members and that postings would be synthesized and sent out, at most, once per week.

Inside This Issue

President’s Column ........................................... 1
The Section on Child Maltreatment’s 2008 Dissertation Award ........................................... 2
Case Notes: Cyberbullies Invade MySpace: Teenager’s Suicide Prompts Psychological and Legal Response ........................................... 3
Public Policy: Congress Set for Election-Year Budget Politics ........................................... 4
Best Practices: Neuropsychological Assessment and Functioning in Children with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder ........................................... 6
The Section on Child Maltreatment’s Early Career Award for Outstanding Contributions to Practice ........................................... 7
Section Executive Committee ........................................... 8
As of this writing, Victoria Talwar, our Newsletter Editor, and I will be moderating the Listserv. If there are any Section members who might be interested in participating in the oversight of the Listserv’s activities, please let me know.

On a different front, Alan Kazdin, who is the President of APA for 2008, is pursuing several presidential initiatives this year that are vitally important to the Section. One is the Summit on Violence and Abuse in Relationships: Connecting Agendas and Forging New Directions which will take place on February 28-29 in Bethesda, MD. Topics for the summit include intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, children exposed to violence and abuse, elder abuse, and culture, ethnicity, and gender-related issues. Many national experts in these areas are on the program. Division 37 and the Section are also well represented with such invited speakers as Mark Chaffin and Sandra Graham-Berman. This promises to be a wonderful meeting.

Dr. Kazdin’s second initiative which is of great relevance to the Section is the APA Presidential Task Force on Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Trauma in Children and Adolescents. Annette La Greca will be the Chair of this Task Force. I was also nominated for this Task Force and will be honored to be part of this important undertaking. The Task Force will be meeting twice during 2008. There will also be a Presidential Symposium at the APA meeting in August in Boston dedicated to childhood PTSD and trauma. This Task Force could not be more timely given the devastating impact of recent acts of terrorism and natural disasters. Without diminishing the effects of these tragic events, though, it is important for all of us to remember that child abuse and neglect are the trauma to which the greatest number of children and adolescents in the United States are exposed. I will do my best to keep child maltreatment at the center of the work of the Task Force.

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The Section on Child Maltreatment’s 2008 Dissertation Award

The Section on Child Maltreatment (Section 1 of Division 37, APA) announces its ninth annual dissertation award. A $400 prize will be awarded to one successful graduate student applicant to assist with expenses in conducting dissertation research on the topic of child maltreatment.

Applicants are requested to submit four (4) copies of the following:

1) A letter of interest, indicating how the applicant would use the award funds toward the completion of the dissertation research;
2) A 100 word abstract; and
3) A five-page proposal summarizing the research to be conducted.

Electronic submissions will also be accepted.

Please submit applications by April 15 to:

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9201 University City Blvd.
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Applicants will be notified of the decision in June. The award will be presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in Boston, MA, August 14-17, 2008.
Case Notes

Cyberbullies Invade MySpace: Teenager’s Suicide Prompts Psychological and Legal Response

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By now, the details surrounding the suicide of 13-year-old Megan Meier in Dardenne Prairie, Missouri are hauntingly familiar to many of us. Megan hanged herself in her closet after allegedly receiving a message stating “The world would be a better place without you” sent to her MySpace account by a young man named Josh Evans. As it turns out, Josh Evans never even existed. He was a pseudo-identity created online by Lori Drew, the mother of a former friend of Megan’s from school. Drew reportedly created Josh Evans to gain Megan’s trust through a series of flattering, flirtatious messages to learn whether Megan was spreading rumors about Drew’s daughter.

Megan died in late October 2006, but more than a year later, her case continues to spark public interest and outrage. Initially local prosecutors declined to file any criminal charges related to the internet hoax because they were unable to retrieve key messages posted on the website and multiple users had access to the MySpace account. In November 2007, the city council (known as the Board of Aldermen) unanimously passed a measure making Internet harassment a misdemeanor punishable by up to a $500 fine and 90 days in jail. Most recently in January 2008, a federal grand jury in Los Angeles began issuing subpoenas in the case. As reported in the Los Angeles Times, prosecutors in the U.S. attorney’s office are considering charging Drew with defrauding MySpace by creating the bogus account. If convicted, Drew could serve up to 20 years in prison. Prosecutors believe they have jurisdiction in the case because MySpace—the would-be victim of fraud—is based in Beverly Hills. MySpace also took action early this year by announcing it will implement new measures to protect children from online bullies and predators. Highlights include establishing an email registry where parents can prohibit their children from creating profiles on the network, responding more quickly (within 72 hours) to complaints of inappropriate content or conduct online, and allowing users under 18 years-old to block older users from contacting them or viewing their profiles.

This tragic case raises several intriguing issues for members of the psychological and legal communities. Only recently have researchers begun to examine the prevalence and effects of cyberbullying on children. Depending on the exact survey, anywhere from 9 to 35 percent of children report experiencing some form of cyberbullying or harassment (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Wolack, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). Approximately one-third of child victims in these studies reported that they were distressed, frustrated, or angered by the cyberbullying and many (33-40%) failed to disclose the incident to anyone. These statistics, in concert with the untimely death of Meier, underscore the need for increased parental awareness and supervision of children’s internet activity. Children are spending increasingly more time online and bullies have followed from the playground to cyberspace as well. Knowing the nature and extent of children’s online activity is the first line of defense in preventing internet victimization. Moreover, because children have increasing web access at school, administrators and local school boards must continue to develop anti-bullying policies and programs in order to discourage children from using the internet to harass each other. Additional research will be necessary to evaluate the short- and long-terms effects of such efforts.

The legal system can also play an important role in preventing cyberbullying. Inevitably the law lags behind recent advances in technology and this case is no exception. Given the fluid nature of this process, legislators are left to draft policies armed with little more than hindsight and lessons learned from unforeseen circumstances like Megan’s death. Laws prohibiting internet harassment have been introduced in Missouri and many other states are considering similar legislation as well. Should the U.S. attorney’s office file charges against Drew for allegedly defrauding MySpace, the case could have interesting implications for individuals—both children and adults—who use social networking websites. Although the user terms of agreement for MySpace expressly prohibit providing false information, the fictitious Josh Evans account is by no means an isolated occurrence. The potential use of pseudo-identities and bogus profiles may be well-understood by adults, but young internet users may be more naïve and susceptible to deception on this front. Beyond MySpace, other cyber forums such as blogs and chatrooms may not have similar restrictions nor wish to on free-speech grounds. The ability of internet users to assume pseudo-identities and engage in fantasy dialogue with others may be one aspect of virtual reality that they will fight vehemently to protect. What role society’s interest in protecting children plays in this battle remains to be seen.
Public Policy

Congress Set for Election-Year Budget Politics

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After taking its scheduled year-end break, Congress returned in mid-January from the holiday recess to face a legislatively agenda enlivened by the politics of an election year. Both parties are looking at some form of tax rebate to put money into the hands of consumers to pump up the economy. Democrats are also considering additional spending to help with expanded unemployment insurance and food stamp benefits, while Republicans will be looking at proposals to promote job growth. On top of that, another round of budget battles with the President is sure to dominate the session. That process begins in earnest on February 4 when the President is scheduled to present Congress with his proposed budget for the 2009 fiscal year.

The holiday recess got off to a late start last year, with Congress still in session the week before Christmas finishing up the appropriations legislation finally signed into law by President Bush on December 26. The omnibus funding measure, H.R. 2764, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008, which combines spending for eleven of the twelve appropriations bills still awaiting final action at the end of the year, left appropriations for most child and family services programs at the 2007 funding levels, and then applied an across-the-board cut of 1.747 percent, resulting in cuts below last year’s spending.

For example, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) programs were hit with an actual cut of $1.746 million, not counting funds earmarked for special projects at $1.888 million or the new discretionary funds at $10 million requested by the White House which the bill directs to go for support of “a range of home visitation programs...that have met high evidentiary standards.” The final budget leaves CAPTA State Grants at $26.535 million, CAPTA Discretionary Grants at $37.135 million, and the CAPTA Community-Based Prevention Grants at $41.689 million for 2008.

A series of veto threats by the President had blocked congressional efforts from passing individual appropriations bills – except for the Defense Department spending measure signed into law in November. The President demanded that spending not exceed the overall total for the administration’s budget sent to Congress last February. In the final funding measure, appropriations leaders in Congress agreed to meet the President’s budget total, while setting many of their own spending priorities within that amount.

In a statement released by the President on signing the bill, he observed that the measure would “fund the Federal Government within the reasonable and responsible spending levels I proposed.” At the same time, he warned, “There is still more to be done to rein in Government spending. In February I will submit my budget proposal for fiscal year 2009, which will once again restrain spending. keep taxes low, and continue us on a path towards a balanced budget.”

While the majority of programs in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) providing support for children and families were either cut or left at the 2007 spending levels, a handful were singled out for increases. Among them, Head Start was increased by $14 million to $6.9 billion, against the President’s proposal to cut Head Start by $10c million. Likewise, the Community Services block grant, which the Bush administration has regularly sought to eliminate altogether, was funded again this year and given an increase of $35 million to total $653.8 million.

Others fared poorly. Funds for the Promoting Safe and Stable Families program — the largest federal funding source for child maltreatment prevention — were cut by $25.789 million. With the mandatory funds held at $345 million, the cut to the PSSF discretionary funds left the FY08 total at $408.311 million compared with $434.1 million in FY07. Until the very end of the budget process, the PSSF funds had held even.

The final spending measure for FY08 also includes a provision, added during Senate floor votes on the Labor-HHS-Education spending legislation, to provide $500,000 for a feasibility study for a National Registry of Substantiated Cases of Child Abuse and Neglect. The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006 (Public law 109-248) authorized the creation of a national registry, and also authorized spending on a study to determine the feasibility of such a registry. The amendment offered by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) with Sen. Jon Kyl (R-AZ) requires the Department of Health and Human Services to complete the study within a year of the enactment of the appropriations legislation. She asserted her understanding that HHS was
unable to initiate the study without funding provided. The national registry would be available to child protection authorities, not to the general public, to use as a resource in tracking previous instances of child maltreatment in order to enable child protection workers to be better equipped with relevant information in assessing cases.

**BUSH SIGNS HEAD START BILL WITH CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION PROVISIONS**

On December 12, close to five years after Congress first took up a bill to reauthorize the Head Start program, President Bush signed into law the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 reauthorizing the early childhood development program for low-income preschoolers. The measure, which extends the Head Start funding authority for five more years through 2012, includes new provisions addressing:

- greater attention to serving children who have been maltreated or are at-risk of abuse or neglect,
- greater attention to the training needs of parents (especially in Early Head Start),
- improved coordination with existing home-based and community-based services, and
- improved collaboration with the state agency responsible for child welfare services and child protective services.

In signing the measure, the President cited the “improved coordination of early childhood delivery systems…to help ensure our investments are better aligned and more effective.” The President was not supportive, however, of the increased funding authorized by the bill. In his statement at the signing ceremony, Bush said, “I am concerned that the bill authorizes spending levels higher than those proposed in my budget. Approval of this legislation is not an endorsement of these funding levels or a commitment to request them.”

The President also expressed disappointment “that the bill fails to include my proposal to protect faith-based organizations’ religious hiring autonomy.” The provisions which would have allowed employment discrimination in Head Start hiring on the basis of religion included in previous bills to reauthorize Head Start while Republicans still controlled Congress had been a major point of controversy blocking passage of the legislation until this year.

The report on the Head Start bill filed by the Senate HELP Committee included extensive discussion acknowledging the important role played by Head Start and Early Head Start programs through the comprehensive services provided to young children and their families in preventing the abuse and neglect of children and in protecting children and ameliorating the effects of maltreatment they may have already suffered.

**BUSH SIGNS SCHIP EXTENSION TO 2009**

On December 29, President Bush signed legislation extending the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) with enough money expected to provide states with the ability to cover through March 2009 those children currently enrolled. States had been pressuring Congress to abandon attempts at an expanded program because of worries that the program would not run out and SCHIP money would come up short, forcing states to remove recipients from their rolls if the current funding level continued. The Congressional Research Service in October reported that 21 states would face combined shortfalls of $1.6 billion in their children’s health insurance programs.

House Republican leaders were willing to support the inclusion of the extra money to help the states facing shortfalls in their programs. However, the Republican leadership refused to support an expansion unless the program was narrowed to children from families earning less than twice the poverty level — about $41,000 for a family of four — and with strong prohibitions against enrolling adults or illegal immigrants.

House Democrats had been pushing to extend SCHIP funding until September 2008, in order to force another debate on what they see as a winning political issue. The extension until 2009 which finally passed and was signed by the President makes the legislation more palatable to Republicans who might not want to deal with the issue again during the 2008 election cycle.

Bush twice vetoed a bipartisan agreement which would have made coverage available to an estimated 10 million children. In his last veto message, Bush objected to using an increased tobacco tax to fund the SCHIP expansion, and he claimed that the new bill would cover children in families with incomes above the national median.

After the second veto, Democrats and some congressional Republicans had negotiated for more than a month with the hope of expanding the program by $35 billion to provide coverage to an additional 4 million children from families who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private insurance. They overwhelmingly supported a tobacco tax increase to pay for the expansion.
Best Practices

Neuropsychological Assessment and Functioning in Children with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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Children who have been exposed to traumatic stressors demonstrate a range of psychiatric symptomatology, which can include symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). To receive a diagnosis of PTSD, an individual must have: 1) experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others, and 2) the person’s response must have involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Beyond exposure to a traumatic event, a diagnosis of PTSD further requires that an individual display symptoms of reexperiencing the traumatic event, avoiding reminders of the trauma, and experiencing increased arousal (American Psychiatric Association, DSM-IV, 1994, p. 467-468). Clinical experience and preliminary empirical research (Moradi et al., 1999; Beers & De Bellis, 2002) together suggest that traumatized children suffering from symptoms of PTSD may be at risk for evidencing higher rates of neuropsychological impairment compared to their non-traumatized counterparts.

There are several possible explanations for the negative associations between PTSD and neuropsychological functioning—specifically attention, memory, and executive functioning. First, in the realm of avoidance cluster symptoms, dissociative symptoms by definition impair attentional capabilities by, in essence, removing a child from the present moment and allowing him or her a temporary escape from reality. Children with heightened dissociative symptoms often appear to daydream or stare into space, and it is expected that children in this state would be less capable of attending to external stimuli—impairments influencing attention, memory, and executive functioning.

Second, the reexperiencing cluster PTSD symptoms manifest through the intrusion of trauma-related material into consciousness, preventing optimal attention and executive functioning and, therefore, the encoding of novel information (Moradi et al., 1999). Children experiencing flashbacks or intrusive memories may be less likely than non-traumatized children to optimally attend to presented stimuli. Thus the link between PTSD and poorer neuropsychological functioning capabilities may be explained in part by the intrusion of competing traumatic stimuli on a child’s consciousness.

Finally, children with histories of trauma exposure often demonstrate heightened emotional arousal, resulting in hypersensitivity, hyperarousal, and hypervigilance. In these situations, children may have greater difficulty attending to or organizing new material, as they are highly focused on their environments (Delaney-Black et al., 2002). For example, a traumatized child in a neuropsychological or cognitive testing situation may have more difficulty than a non-traumatized child filtering out the jarring sound of an office radiator, thus impeding the child from successfully engaging in an attention task, in turn deleteriously affecting the child’s performance.

The negative association between heightened posttraumatic avoidance, reexperiencing, and hyperarousal symptoms and neuropsychological functioning in children may have the capacity to inform the development and implementation of critical prevention and intervention efforts that take more fully into account the myriad symptoms and impairments resulting from childhood trauma exposure. This area of study has implications for children’s functioning across modalities, including at home and school, suggesting that traumatized children may be at risk for developing neurocognitive difficulties. Traumatized children may thus warrant special attention in the classroom. Further, along with addressing the mental health needs of children with PTSD, traumatized children may also benefit from receiving comprehensive neuropsychological evaluations. The results of such assessments could provide parents and teachers with critical information regarding children’s cognitive strengths and weaknesses, facilitating the implementation of early intervention strategies, and remaining vigilant to risk factors and developing concerns.