

# Parental Perceptions of Child Abuse and Well-Being in Guatemala

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# The Headington Program

## Abstract

Ten thousand people live and work on the Guatemala City Dump (GCD); of these, 6,400 are children. These families make a daily living by scavenging through garbage and are marginalized by society. Little research has been conducted in stigmatized communities such as this one, and these families are in need of culturally appropriate child abuse prevention and interventions to support positive parenting. Culture-specific understandings of child abuse (CA), child sexual abuse (CSA), and child well-being (CWB) were explored through a qualitative study. Two focus groups of 43 parents who participate in programs at an NGO in the GCD were conducted, and Grounded Theory was used to analyze the transcripts. For CWB, the most frequently discussed themes were positive emotional involvement (70%), and spiritual and religious influence (17%). For CA, the two most frequently discussed themes were physical abuse (39%) and child labor (29%). For CSA, rape and exposure to sexual activity comprised 31% of the comments each. Implications for culturally appropriate child abuse prevention programs as well as support and empowerment for positive parenting within this challenging environment will be discussed.

## Purpose of Study

Child abuse is a global problem that has far-reaching effects<sup>1</sup> and has a tremendous impact on child well-being. Both are well-researched topics in Western literature; however, little research has been conducted regarding definitions of child abuse and well-being in other cultures, as each cultural group's unique standards shape how they understand both of these constructs<sup>2</sup>. It is necessary to understand parents' definitions of both child abuse and well-being in this context in order to develop culturally specific understandings of abuse. These understandings can inform and initiate the development of culturally relevant programs to enhance positive parenting.

## Method

### Procedure

<sup>1</sup>Participants were recruited through an NGO that serves the population living and working in the Guatemala City dump (N = 43).  
<sup>2</sup>Two focus group discussions were conducted in Spanish by native Guatemalan trained moderators.  
<sup>3</sup>Audiotapes of groups were transcribed in Spanish, and then translated into English by local Guatemalan translators.  
<sup>4</sup>Analysis of transcripts was based on Grounded Theory<sup>3</sup>. An independent team of coders examined the transcripts for consistent themes and significant topics. These themes were compared and reconciled with the research team's coding in order to arrive at final categories.  
<sup>5</sup>The categories were analyzed for frequency and extensiveness

- Frequency = total number of times a theme appeared in a transcript
- Extensiveness = number of participants who gave comments regarding a theme

### Measure

<sup>1</sup>The focus group discussions were based on a structured interview consisting of the following six questions:

- 1) What does it mean for you to have a good childhood?
- 2) In your own words what would you say is child abuse?
- 3) In your own words, what would you say is sexual abuse?
- 4) How can you tell that a boy or a girl has been sexually abused? How does a child act when he or she has been abused?
- 5) What types of situations bring about sexual abuse within the community of the garbage dump? Why is a boy or girl abused here in the dump?
- 6) What topics would you like to cover in future parenting classes?

### Participants

<sup>1</sup>Parent participants were native Guatemalans living and working in the dump community in Guatemala City.  
<sup>2</sup>40 females (93%) and 3 males (7%), the ages ranged from 20 to 63.  
<sup>3</sup>28 (65%) Latino/a, 12 (28%) Indigena, and 3 (7%) did not specify ethnicity.  
<sup>4</sup>Number of years participants had lived in the dump community ranged from 3-45 years, with 42% of participants indicating that they had lived in the dump their whole lives.  
<sup>5</sup>Participants reported 0 years of education (32%), 1 to 5 years of education (39%), 6 to 8 years of education (24%), and 9 or more years of education (5%).

## Results

### Most Frequently Coded Themes:

#### Child Well Being

	Total comments: 30	Freq.	Ext.
Positive Emotional Involvement	70%	(21)	(16)
<i>Subnodes:</i>			
Parental Involvement			
Parental Attention/Communication			
Values and Morals Instilled in Children			
Presence of Father			

"So I think that a happy family is not one that has materials, material things, but rather that has the love of the parents. Because one needs a hug, a kiss, the love of the parents is the most important thing."

Spiritual and Religious Influence 17% (5) (5)

"Children must be taught first to seek the love of God; the love of God is the main thing, and the love of parents."

Physical/Material Resources 7% (2) (2)

	Total comments: 57	Freq.	Ext.
<i>Subnodes:</i>			
Sanitation			
Adequate Physical Environment			
Education/Opportunities for Children	3%	(1)	(1)
<i>Subnode:</i>			
Opportunities Presented to Children			
Child's Internal Experience /Expression of Emotion	3%	(1)	(1)
<i>Subnode:</i>			
Appropriate Emotional Expression			

#### Child Abuse

Physical Abuse 28% (16) (5)

"We get angry with other people, and we take it out on our sons and daughters, hitting them, or mistreating them. They are rebellious."

Sexual Abuse 28% (16) (12)

"Well, the whole thing with the parents, maybe the mother also has no respect, maybe she has no privacy, ... she commits all of that in front of them..."

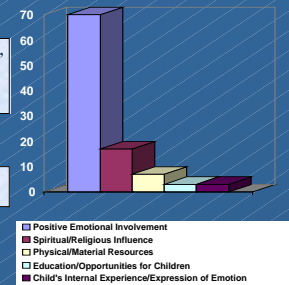
Molestation Sexual Harassment 21% (12) (7)

"I think that child abuse is those parents who put their son or daughters to work when they are very young ... the sons or daughters take the money back home, the parents already are demanding the money from them."

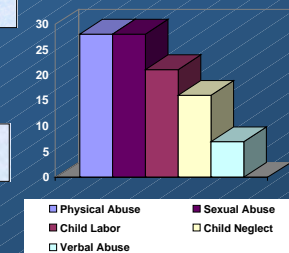
Child Neglect 16% (6)

Verbal Abuse 7% (3)

Top 5 Themes for CWB



Top 5 Themes for CA



## Discussion/Implications

• Our study examined the culture-specific understandings of child well-being and child abuse in the Guatemala City Dump Community, in an effort to derive culturally appropriate child abuse prevention programs as well as support and empowerment for positive parenting.

• The most significant description of CWB by the parents in the GCD was positive emotional involvement, specifically from the parents themselves. The parents noted the importance of family stability and the presence of the father in the home.

• Parents in the GCD emphasized spirituality as a crucial contributor to child well-being. This finding contrasts descriptions of CWB in Western literature, which largely overlooks spirituality as an element of CWB.

• The most significant description of CA by the parents in the GCD was child labor. The parents also considered physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse/emotional abuse, and child neglect as definitions of CA. The findings indicate that the parents have similar understandings of CA as found in Western literature, although their descriptions are less nuanced.

• The most significant descriptions of child sexual abuse by the parents were rape and exposure to sexual activity. The parents also considered contact and non-contact molestation, incest, and harassment as definitions of CSA.

### Recommendations:

- The findings in this study can be used to inform positive parenting programs in this community
- Further research on the outcomes of parenting interventions should be conducted
- A community advisory board of parents from the community could be utilized to develop a positive parenting program
- Interventions should be aimed at systemic as well as individual factors that are related to child abuse

• There were several limitations to the current study which should be addressed with future research:

- The large group size may have affected the willingness of some participants to share openly.
- Despite consultation and other measures to ensure cultural sensitivity, there is nevertheless a residual Western cultural bias in the researchers.
- Though the transcripts were reviewed by several different translators, it is possible that the translation of the documents does not accurately reflect the precise attitudes and opinions of the parents who participated in the focus groups.

## References

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- iii. Fassinger, R. (2005). Paradigms, praxis, problems, and promise: Grounded theory in counseling psychology research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 156-166.