



Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant

**Differential response to child abuse, domestic violence, and physical assault:
What type of message are we sending?**

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Abstract

The acts of child physical abuse, domestic violence, and battery are all considered criminal offenses. Despite this, previous research has demonstrated that cases of child abuse are less likely to have criminal charges filed when compared to other violent offenses. Even when prosecuted and convicted, perpetrators of child abuse are less likely to be incarcerated when compared to perpetrators of other violent crimes. Such differences in criminal charge and conviction rates between child abuse and other violent crimes truly beg the question, “What message are we sending?” Specifically, there appears to be significant biases in terms of how agencies respond to acts of violence between adults and physical acts of violence by a caregiver toward a child. On some level, this suggests that agencies view the act of physical abuse as more acceptable than other acts of violence. This is concerning as each responsible agency’s decision making should be driven by objective standards outlined in Florida statutes as it relates to these criminal offenses, rather than individuals’ own personal beliefs and perceptions. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to examine multiple agencies’ (i.e., child protective services, law enforcement, State Attorney’s Office) responses to different forms of violence and whether there are, in fact, biases in terms of how agencies respond. A secondary aim of this study is to develop, implement, and evaluate agency-specific training to reduce any biases that exist in decision making and increase inter-agency collaboration in responding to acts of violence (e.g., consistent referrals from child protective services to law enforcement)

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