



Improving intervention



Associate Professor Elisa Romano introduces her work as Director of the Children's Well-Being Laboratory and discusses the significant gaps it is addressing in child maltreatment research

Can you introduce your research and the experiences that have guided your career?

Primarily, my research focuses on understanding and trying to change the often negative impact of child maltreatment and family violence on children. I have always been fascinated by children – the way they develop, the way they make sense of the world and their place in it, and the way families play a central role in this process. I want to better understand what happens when children do not grow up in warm, loving, and well-functioning families but instead experience maltreatment and violence within their homes. As a clinical psychologist, I have naturally wanted to intervene at some level with these children so that they could grow in healthy ways and with families so they could support children's optimal development.

Child neglect is one of the highest occurring forms of maltreatment in Canada and the US, yet receives relatively little attention. Why do you think this is?

Neglect occurs when parents do not meet their child's basic and developmental needs. These acts of omission can be harder to detect than

forms of maltreatment that represent acts of commission, such as physical and sexual abuse. However, I believe there is growing awareness of the prevalence and harmful effects of child neglect and the importance of early intervention with families where neglect has occurred.

This can be seen in the fact that our project on the implementation of an evidence-based child neglect programme (SafeCare®) within Ontario child welfare has been well received by a Canadian federal funding agency and by participating child welfare agencies. So far, our data indicate that families are finding it useful in improving their parenting skills and ability to properly care for their young children. Given its focus on 0-5 year olds, SafeCare® can be viewed as a preventive intervention.

Section 43 of the Criminal Code gives Canadian parents the right to use reasonable force for the purposes of correcting children's behaviour. In an age where numerous countries now prohibit corporal punishment, do you think this law is still relevant?

I fully support the removal of Section 43

because it violates children's rights to protection under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Canada ratified in 1991. Moreover, well-conducted research shows time and again that physical punishment is an ineffective and harmful disciplinary practice and that there is a high risk for physically punitive acts to quickly escalate to abuse.

Do you have other projects that are addressing knowledge gaps in childhood maltreatment and family violence?

We have various on-going research projects that are addressing some important gaps. Examples include understanding childhood sexual abuse among males, recognising the impact on families where a youth has sexually offended, improving child welfare's ability to use research data in an applied manner and building more trauma-sensitive school environments. In all these projects, we have adopted a systems approach because children are embedded in multiple systems of care. In this way, we can better ensure that children and youth with maltreatment histories can be effectively supported by all individuals who play an important role in their lives.

Child maltreatment, family violence, and children's well-being

A team at the **University of Ottawa** exploring child maltreatment is using its findings to improve the well-being of those affected by trauma, in particular children and youth

WHETHER THROUGH NEGLECT, family violence or sexual abuse, child maltreatment is often a very difficult experience for children and youth. It can impact various interrelated and mutually influential domains of children's functioning at home and school, and the resulting costs to society are significant.

At the University of Ottawa, clinical psychologist and Associate Professor Elisa Romano directs the Children's Well-Being Laboratory (CWBL), composed of graduate and undergraduate students. At the heart of the lab's research is a focus on the contexts influencing the emotional and behavioural development of children. To this end, almost all of Romano's efforts are channelled into advancing the applied field of child maltreatment and family violence.

While it is important to broaden understanding within the field, the lab is acutely aware of the need for applied research so that findings can be used to positively impact the lives of children and families in which maltreatment has occurred. There is, for example, a critical need for evidence-based interventions to ensure that all programmes of care being implemented are supported by research.

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

The diversity of Romano's research reflects the potential widespread impact that child maltreatment can have on psycho-social, educational and relationship outcomes.

In the area of physical punishment, Canadian law still permits parents to use reasonable force in correcting children's behaviour, despite the wealth of research evidence attesting to its ineffectiveness. Romano's

studies have found that attitudes can be changed through public education, especially when the potential harms of child physical punishment are effectively communicated. Along with several graduate students, Romano is currently engaged in implementing the Positive Discipline in Everyday

Parenting programme, a universal primary prevention strategy aimed at reducing violence within the family and promoting positive, non-physically punitive disciplinary strategies.

CWBL is also laying important foundations in areas that have historically received little attention. One project involves training child welfare practitioners to deliver an evidence-based, in-home programme to families involved in the Ontario child welfare system because of concerns related primarily to child neglect. Another project focuses on childhood sexual abuse among males; while it is estimated that one in six men experience sexual abuse during childhood or adolescence, it is severely underreported due to strong social influences. Several projects are aiming to identify profiles of sexual abuse characteristics in adult males to link them to various mental health outcomes, discover how profiles can map onto the gains derived in treatment and use neuroimaging technology to explore any links that may exist between male sexual abuse, working memory and emotional processing.

TRAINING FOR TRAUMA

The lab's efforts to make schools more sensitive to the needs of children with maltreatment histories is breaking new ground in Ontario, if not Canada. Romano's team is developing a training curriculum for primary school personnel to introduce support strategies at school for children who have experienced maltreatment. Critical to the pilot programme, school personnel are taught about the prevalence of child maltreatment, the ways it can be manifested and its effects. Of course, there is also a research component to evaluate the impact of the training on school practices.

FACTORS AFFECTING CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DEVELOPMENT

OBJECTIVES

To understand and change the negative impact that maltreatment and family violence can have on children

KEY COLLABORATORS

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PARTNERS

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ELISA ROMANO is Associate Professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa and Director of the Children's Well-Being Laboratory. She is also a registered clinical psychologist in the province of Ontario and a member of the Interdisciplinary Research Laboratory on the Rights of the Child (Faculty of Law, University of Ottawa). She is actively involved in teaching, clinical supervision, and supervision of graduates and undergraduates.



The Children's Well-Being laboratory. **From left to right:** Elisa Romano, Tessa Bell, Elena Gallitto, Sabrina Fréchette, Jennifer Lyons and Kelly Weegar

