In any area of science, and certainly in the study of human behavior, there is a series of progressive steps that characterize our level of understanding of a phenomenon. The first and most basic step toward understanding a behavioral problem is being able to describe it. Once we are able to describe accurately the characteristics of the problem or phenomenon, we can then develop a theoretical or conceptual model to account for what is observed. Finally, based on an adequate conceptual model, it is possible to generate specific predictions and interventions concerning the problem in which we are interested.

In the case of child abuse, being able to describe characteristics of abusive parents and abused children can provide us with important information that is ultimately related to our formulations about the causes of this problem and its treatment. Within the child abuse literature over the past 15 years, a large number of studies have examined characteristics of abusive families. The purpose of this chapter is to review some of the major findings of these studies and to consider, in at least some cases, their methodological adequacy.
CHAPTER 2

2.1. PARENT CHARACTERISTICS ASSOCIATED WITH ABUSIVE BEHAVIOR

The earliest studies of abusive parents were based, almost entirely, on anecdotal reports drawn from very limited clinical samples. Investigators gradually began to use more quantified methods to study parent and family factors related to child abuse and, still later, a number of projects using control group comparisons appeared in the literature. While many different variables related to abuse have been proposed, attention has focused most extensively on several: socioeconomic factors (especially those which create life stress for the family); deficits in the parent's knowledge and use of appropriate child-management skills; lack of knowledge concerning "normal" child behavior; a parent's history of having also been raised in an abusive family environment; social isolation; parent personality disorders; family discord and stress; and emotional overreactivity when the child misbehaves or emits other aversive behavior.

2.1.1. Socioeconomic Disadvantage

A large number of investigators have proposed a relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and patterns of child maltreatment. Gil (1970; 1975), for example, has argued that the deprivations of poverty, including high-density living in deteriorating housing, few financial resources, large numbers of children, the absence of child care alternatives, single-parent households, and inadequate social support services, create chronic stress and frustration for the economically disadvantaged family. This level of pervasive life-style frustration, according to Gil (1975), creates a "triggering context" in which violence toward children is more likely to occur. While Gil emphasizes that poverty per se is not a direct cause of child abuse, the stress and lack of support resources which characterize extreme social disadvantage can reduce a parent's general adaptability and self-control, thereby increasing the likelihood of family violence. In similar fashion, Gelles (1973) suggests that "structural" social stressors such as unemployment and large family size without adequate economic resources, as well as values or norms favoring the appropriateness of