

# The Conflict Tactics Scales Handbook

Murray A. Straus, Ph.D., Sherry L. Hamby, Ph.D., and W. Louise Warren, Ph.D.

Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2)

CTS: Parent-Child Version (CTSPC)

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Since the first use of the *Conflict Tactics Scales* (CTS) in the early 1970s (Straus, 1973), the CTS has become the most widely used survey tool for research on spousal abuse (Morash, 1986). This handbook presents a summary of the principal work that has been carried out in relation to the CTS since its initial publication in 1973. It is intended as the primary source of background material and guidance to support the use, in both research and clinical settings, of the most current and recommended forms of the CTS: the *Revised Conflict Tactics Scales*, or CTS2 (WPS Product No. W-396A), and the *Conflict Tactics Scales: Parent-Child Version*, or CTSPC (WPS Product No. W-396B). Although much of the work summarized in this handbook was carried out in the 1970s and 1980s, the issues defined and conclusions drawn remain pertinent today. More recent work that clarifies the current relevance of these pioneering studies is also reviewed.

### General Description

This handbook differs from the typical test manual because the CTS is not a conventional psychological test. No broad-based standard scores are offered nor is formal diagnostic interpretation recommended. Its use is supported, instead, by a substantial and unique history as a survey tool of interest to both sociologists and psychologists. Initially developed for epidemiological studies, the CTS has helped define key issues in the understanding of violence in American culture as it occurs in families and intimate relationships in the population at large and in clinical populations. Because of its origins and long history of use, the CTS provides for documentation of domestic and relationship violence in clinical cases in a way that is both succinct and fertile. Yet it remains a practical way to characterize patterns of domestic and intimate violence in larger groups of interest to researchers across scientific disciplines and political programs, so that interdisciplinary integration of knowledge and coordination of efforts in the area is facilitated.

The CTSPC is one of the few questionnaires available that is designed to obtain reports of current maltreatment from parents, as opposed to retrospective reports from adults about childhood experiences with their parents.

Over several decades, the CTS has been employed worldwide in studies examining the characteristics of violence in families and intimate relationships. The resulting proliferation of adapted forms of the instrument has given rise to some confusion about its use, confounding attempts to generalize across studies in this important body of research. It is hoped that the availability of this handbook and standard forms of the scales will help to remedy this situation and improve the ability of researchers and clinicians to evaluate how this large body of work relates to their use of the scales in unique settings.

### Contents of This Manual

In chapter 2 of this handbook, a general discussion of the social and cultural context in which the scales were developed is presented. In chapter 3, the principles that guided the development of the surveys and the evolution of the CTS2 and the CTSPC forms from the CTS are described. Chapter 4 offers some examples of how the CTS has been used in a large variety of settings. Information about the psychometric properties of the surveys is summarized in chapter 5, along with a discussion of the limitations of the instrument and some controversial issues relating to its use. The last two chapters of the handbook, chapters 6 and 7, offer practical guidance for administering and scoring the CTS2 and the CTSPC, respectively. Appendix A provides a comprehensive bibliography organized by topic. Appendix B lists CTS2 results for a variety of research samples.

The material in this handbook has been compiled from a variety of monographs, articles, and book chapters previously collected in a manual and made available by the University of New Hampshire Family Research Laboratory. Some of the text is new. All has been organized with the aim of grouping together information and discussion on similar topics from various sources so that users do not have to search through each source text to find paragraphs or sections relevant to their specific concerns. A brief description of the sources and content of each chapter is

provided in the following sections.

### **Chapter 2: Social and Cultural Context**

Chapter 2 provides a review of the recent evolution of popular and scientific conceptualizations of intrafamily conflict, abuse, and conflict between intimate partners. Changes in social and cultural awareness regarding these issues have greatly influenced the way treatment is delivered in clinical settings. Key discussions of contextual considerations central to the development and use of the CTS have been published previously in the books *Physical Violence in American Families: Risk Factors and Adaptations to Violence in 8,145 Families* (Straus & Gelles, 1990b), and *Family Abuse and Its Consequences: New Directions in Research* (Hotaling, Finkelhor, Kirkpatrick, & Straus, 1988). Relevant chapters by Straus (1990a, 1990d) and Straus & Gelles (1988) from these sources are summarized in chapter 2 of this handbook. Additional coverage of these issues that has appeared in journal articles (Aldorando & Straus, 1994; Straus & Gelles, 1986) is also summarized in chapter 2. The estimated prevalence of physically violent intrafamily conflict tactics is outlined. Changes in the estimated prevalence that appear related to large-scale prevention and treatment efforts are described.

### **Chapter 3: The Development of the CTS, CTS2, and CTSPC**

The development of the CTS, CTS2, and CTSPC has been described in a number of prior publications. Straus (1979b) has described the development of the original CTS, and Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman (1996) detailed the revision efforts that produced the CTS2. Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, and Runyan (1998) have presented a description of the development of the CTSPC. Content from these materials is combined and summarized in chapter 3, so that one can easily review how the three instruments are related. Tables that list, side by side, the items that are contained on each form and the scores yielded by each are displayed here. The chapter outlines the principles on which all three forms are based, as well as the unique concepts that apply to each form.

### **Chapter 4: Sample Applications**

The extensive use of the CTS around the world for a variety of research purposes and in numerous research settings has provided a wealth of published work using the instrument. Appendix A provides a complement to chapter 4 in the form of a comprehensive bibliography. Two examples of settings where the CTS has been found useful—family therapy (Aldorando & Straus, 1994) and corrections research (Straus, 1993a)—are also described at greater length. Although most of the studies listed refer to the original CTS or distinctive adaptations of it, the body of work provides a substantial foundation for current and future work with the newer, recommended forms provided

in this handbook.

### **Chapter 5: Psychometric Properties and Limitations**

There has been much discussion over the past few decades about how use of the CTS to characterize heterosexual partner violence has impacted the formation of public policy in this area. More recently, the question has arisen of whether and how the CTS can be of use in clinical settings. Straus (1990d) has reviewed and discussed at length findings and criticisms regarding the psychometric properties of the original CTS during its long history of use as a survey tool. The CTS2 was created to address the shortcomings of its predecessor. The success of this effort has been indicated by preliminary findings regarding the psychometric characteristics of the CTS2, made available by Straus et al. (1996). An overview of criticisms of the original CTS and psychometric findings reported for the original CTS and the CTS2 are provided in chapter 5.

The CTSPC is an adaptation of the CTS and is the recommended format for measuring specific aspects of parent-to-child interactions. Wauchope and Straus (1990a, 1990b) and Straus and Hamby (1997) have documented results obtained using adaptations of the original CTS to study physical punishment and physical abuse of American children. The adaptation for this use was achieved by modifying the Verbal Aggression items (renamed Psychological Aggression items on the CTSPC) and Physical Assault items to achieve greater item clarity and age-appropriateness, and by adding new Nonviolent Discipline items, supplementary items for Neglect, and supplemental questions on discipline methods and sexual abuse. The CTSPC also provides better differentiation between levels of severity of aggression by parents. Thus, the CTSPC should be better suited to evaluating child maltreatment than the original CTS. Psychometric properties supporting its use are summarized in chapter 5.

The available evidence is generally supportive of using scores on both instruments, especially when comparison questions involve research groups participating in a single study. There exist, nonetheless, significant gaps in this area that are particularly relevant to transferring use of the instruments to clinical settings, including the absence of definitive comparison samples. For example, a relatively large, nationally representative comparison sample is available for CTSPC scores, but these data were collected by telephone interview rather than the self-report administration format that is recommended in this handbook, and empirical data demonstrating equivalence between the two administration formats has yet to be collected. Practitioners considering the CTS2 or CTSPC for use in their clinical work may decide, for these reasons, to forego altogether the calculation of formal scores. Because of the attention given to the selection of items, and the extensive theoretical and empirical background represented in this handbook, the CTS2 and CTSPC are useful as interview guides, checklists to document the categorical presence and frequency of each specific behavior in a given relationship, and tools to focus therapeutic discussion and interpartner communication.

### **Chapters 6 and 7: Administration, Scoring, and Interpretation**

The CTS2 is now the recommended standard version of the original CTS, and the CTSPC is the version recommended for characterizing parent-to-child violence. A sample of a completed CTS2 form with administration and scoring guidelines is provided in chapter 6. Similarly, a sample of a completed CTSPC form is displayed in chapter 7. Both forms are brief and take around 10 minutes to administer. Guidelines are offered for using CTS2 and CTSPC results in both clinical and research settings. It is recommended that departures from the standard

administration format be undertaken with due consideration to the consequent sacrifice of generalizability across studies. However, it is understood that for some research questions, adaptation of the administration format will be deemed necessary. In these cases, the Western Psychological Services (WPS) Rights and Permissions department (1-800-648-8857) must be contacted before proceeding with the work. Beyond its legal necessity, this procedure offers the additional advantage that WPS may be aware of similar adaptations that are already available or underway, and relevant unpublished comparison data may be thus uncovered.