

# Hidden Wounds: Understanding the Long-Term Effects of Child Abuse

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### Abstract

Globally, childhood is legally defined as the period before the age of 18. Children are inherently curious, imaginative, and energetic. Their rapid cognitive and physical development, coupled with an innate openness to new experiences, makes them adaptable and creative. To foster their optimal growth and well-being, children require a supportive environment that encourages play, exploration, learning, and the development of emotional resilience. Child abuse is a harmful act committed against a child by someone the child knows, trusts or unknowns. It can involve physical, emotional, sexual, or neglectful treatment that damages the child's well-being. Every year, more than 500,000 children are confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Long-term effects on children's physical, emotional, and social development can result from child abuse. It's critical to identify the warning signs of abuse and to notify the proper authorities of any suspected occurrences.

**Keywords:** Childhood, Child abuse, long lasting effects

### Introduction

#### Human Development and Growth

Postnatal growth is strongly impacted by foetal health. To ensure the best possible foetal development and subsequent growth, high-quality prenatal care is essential. Growth and development in the postnatal period are related, but happen at different speeds.

#### Phases of Development

- Early childhood (0–1 year): Quick development, laying the groundwork for later growth.
- Toddler (1-5 years): Ongoing development, social-emotional learning, language learning.
- Childhood (3-11 years): The early years are characterized by the development of motor skills, language, and early cognitive abilities. Complex cognitive development, including the ability to solve problems and think abstractly, occurs during middle childhood.
- Adolescence: spanning 12-18 years, is characterized by swift physical changes, notable cognitive and emotional growth, identity creation, and increased independence.
- Growing older: Maintaining one's health, pursuing personal and professional objectives.

## **Children**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines children as anybody under the legal age of eighteen. Most nations have embraced this globally recognized concept. The precise age at which someone is deemed a child, however, has been a topic of continuous discussion in India. In the Indian Census and other official endeavours, children are those under the age of fourteen.

### **Aspects of Pediatric Development (WHO)**

Childhood is a crucial time for fast growth and development, marked by notable advances in the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical domains. During this phase, children learn vital physical skills, grow in their capacity for abstract thought, and establish deep connections. In order to promote the best possible development of children, the World Health Organization (WHO) stresses the significance of creating a loving and supporting environment.

### **What Does Abuse Mean?**

Any deliberate behavior or deed intended to control, threaten, force, or cause harm to another individual is considered abuse. It is an abuse of power that takes on intimate, trustworthy, and dependent relationships in order to weaken the victim. Abuse is not restricted to just one of these categories; it can be emotional, psychological, financial, sexual, or physical. Abuse is defined as any attempt to control, manipulate, or take advantage of another person in order to affect their behavior, actions, beliefs, or thinking.

### **Child Abuse: What is it?**

Any action, behaviour, or gesture on the part of an adult or kid that causes a child to suffer significant harm is considered child abuse. In addition to being emotional, sexual, or physical, it can also take the form of neglect, lack of love, and care. Child abuse and neglect, also known as child maltreatment, is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) as any type of maltreatment, whether it be physical or emotional, sexual, neglectful behaviour, or viable, those results in either real or possible damage to the children wellness, longevity, growth, or self-esteem across a relationship of responsibility, faith, or authority.

### **Incidence of Child Abuse**

The prevalence of child abuse is reported to be 7.9% for men and 19.7% for women worldwide, with the majority of perpetrators having personal ties to their victims. India saw a startling 8.7% rise in child abuse cases in 2022, with 162,000 incidences overall, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).

### **Forms of Child Abuse**

Abuse of minors: Abuse of children below the age of eighteen which classified as child maltreatment. At a relationship based on duty, belief, or authority, it involves all types of physical and/or emotional abuse, sexual abuse, abandonment, inattentiveness, and viable or other forms of manipulation that may really or potentially endanger the children health, existence, growth, or self-respect.

1. Physical abuse refers to deliberate actions that cause bodily harm to a kid, such as striking, kicks, biting, burning, or jerking.
2. Behaviours that adversely affect a child's mental health, such as calling names, making fun of them, threatening them, and unceasingly criticizing them, are considered emotional abuse.

3. Any sexual act involving a minor, such as physical contact, sexual penetration, or exposure to graphic content, is considered sexual abuse.
4. Neglect: When a caregiver does not provide a child with the necessities—such as clothing, food, shelter, or medical care—it is considered neglect.
5. Exploitation: Using a child for one's own benefit or profit, such as child labor, child trafficking, or child marriage, is known as exploitation.

It is very important to reminisce that these types of classifications are not exclusive of one another, and a child may suffer from numerous types of abuse at similar time.

### **The Effects of Maltreatment of Children**

Children's responses to abuse or neglect can have long-lasting effects, even extending across generations, in addition to the initial physical harm. Maltreatment of children has been linked to long-term behavioral, psychological, and physical problems as well as expenses to society. These results could stand alone or be related to another also.

Abuse or negligence, for example, can delay brain development and consequence in psychological issues like lower self-esteem, which can then fuel highly-danger behaviors alike drug addiction. The specific outcomes may vary broadly based on the kind, frequency and length of the abuse and also the child's rapport with the abuser.

### **Effects on Physical Health**

While some physical consequences of abuse or neglect, such brain damage from a head injury, may show up right away, others may take months or even years to show up or be recognized. Even while there is ample evidence linking physical abuse to poor health, it is important to recognize that mistreatment in any form is having long-lasting or permanent physical effects.

Maltreatment in childhood has been connected with an enlarged risk for several long lasting and/or forthcoming health problems, including, but not limited to the following: (Widom et al., 2016; Monnat & Chandler, 2015; Czaja, Bentley, & Johnson, 2012)

- Lung illness
- Diabetes
- Malnourishment
- Vision complications
- Functional limits
- Cardiac arrest
- Arthritis
- Backbone issues
- Raised blood pressure
- Brain wound
- Migraine aches
- Long term bronchitis/pulmonary emphysema/long-lasting obstructive pulmonary illness
- Cancer
- Stroke
- Bowel sickness
- Chronic fatigue disorder

Abnormalities in some brain regions, both structural and functional, have been related to childhood maltreatment and neglect. Example, story of abuse might be associated with changes in the following brain areas' size and/or function and also a reduced performance in the total volume of the brain (Bick & Nelson, 2016).

- The amygdala and hippocampus are crucial components in emotion processing and have a significant impact on memory and also learning.
- The orbitofrontal cortex is one which responsible for managing emotions and also making decisions based on rewards.
- The cerebellum supports executive functions and also it coordinates motor behaviour.
- The corpus callosum oversights numerous functions, like emotion, arousal, higher cognitive abilities, and communication between the left and right hemispheres of the brain.

### **What is an Epigenetics?**

Studying heritable variations in gene expression that are not brought on by changes to DNA is known as epigenetics. These alterations can be inherited and are impacted by external circumstances. Early life events, such as mistreatment of children, can cause epigenetic modifications that are connected to a number of illnesses. Studies have revealed changes in the gene expression patterns linked to cancer, heart disease, immunological issues, schizophrenia, bipolar condition, and depression among people who be situated abuse during childhood (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010).

### **Effects on the Mind**

Numerous psychological issues can arise from child misuse and negligence. Wounded may feel alone, scared, and mistrusted, which can have long-term psychological effects includes depression, decreased self-esteem, difficulties at school, and trouble in establishing and lasting relationships. The following psychological effects of child mistreatment and negligence have been associated by research:

### **Decreased Cognitive Capability and Executive Functioning**

Mistreatment-encouraged disturbances at brain growth which can lead to deficits in executive functioning, as well as working memory, self-management, and mental flexibility or adaptability (i.e., the dimension to view objects and situations from numerous angles). Assaulted children are also experience other cognitive issues like difficulties in paying attention and also learning new things (Bick & Nelson, 2016).

### **Scarce Emotional and Psychological Well-being**

Abuses in children increases the possibility of emerging depression, anxiety, and numerous additional psychological issues at an adult. According to research studies (Choi, DiNitto, Marti, & Segal, 2017; Fuller-Thomson, Baird, Dhrodia, & Brennenstuhl, 2016), adults who are having a history of abuse are committed suicide more frequently than persons without. Moreover, persons having major depressive disorder who were abused or history of mishandling are responded less to antidepressant medication, especially if the abuse occurred when the patient was seven years old or younger (Williams, Debattista, Duchemin, Schatzberg, & Nemeroff, 2016)

### **Social Challenges Faced and Attachment Issues**

Attachment problems can rise in foster children who have been assaulted and have had their early caregiving broken up. A child's further capability to build healthy and positive peer, social, and romantic relationships may be undesirably affected by attachment difficulties. Additionally, antisocial tendencies which can result in criminal behaviour as an adult are more likely to develop in children who experience misuse or negligence.

### **Stress Following Trauma**

Neglected or traumatized children may acquire posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Reliving the traumatic events over and over again, avoiding people, locations, and activities which associated with their abuse, fear feeling, horror, anger, guilt, or humiliation, starting speedily, and revealing hyper attentiveness, irritability, or other temper changes are all symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Sege et al., 2017). Extended in adulthood, PTSD in child can reason despair, thoughts of suicide and actions, substance mishandling, and oppositional or disobedient behaviours. These effects might delay a child's capability to learn, grow, and form thoughtful networks.

### **Effects on Behaviour**

Even when the abuse or neglect stops, victims of child abuse and neglect frequently display challenging behaviours. The following examples show how abuse can have an impact on a person's behaviour as an adult or adolescent.

### **Deviant Sexual Practices**

According to research studies, children who have misused or faced negligence are much possible to start taking sexual risks after they get to adolescence. These risks contain having many sexual partners, beginning sexual behaviour earlier, and experiencing transactional sexual activity—exchanging sex for money, gifts or presence and other material support (Thompson et al., 2017) which raises the risk of getting an STD.

### **Delinquency in Childhood Resulting in Criminality as an Adult**

The link between child abuse and future juvenile delinquency and also illegal activity has been shown in many studies. Studies supported by the National Institute of Justice indicate that children who experience physical and emotional abuse are at a higher risk of developing antisocial behaviours and forming relationships with others who display similar traits. Additionally, the effects of child abuse on delinquent behaviour vary between boys and girls. According to Herrenkohl et al. (2017), the study found that boys typically exhibited externalizing behaviours, such as bullying, aggression, and hostility, which later contributed to criminal behaviour in adulthood. In contrast, girls were more likely to display internalizing behaviours, such as sadness, social withdrawal, and anxiety.

### **Use of Liquor and Drugs**

Individuals who were maltreated as children had a potentially higher risk of developing substance use disorders compared to adults who were not subjected to maltreatment during childhood (Choi, DiNitto, Marti, & Choi, 2017).

### **Future Abuse Perpetrated by Others**

Studies show that, even if most of them do not go on to do so, children who have been the victims of abuse or neglect are more likely than children who were not to abuse or neglect their own children. Early exposure to physical abuse or neglect may lead to children becoming caught up in this cycle of maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018).

### **Impact on Society**

The effects of child abuse and neglect extend beyond the physical, psychological, and behavioural implications that bear a heavy price for the children who suffer from it. Society bears both direct costs, such as hospitalizations and foster care payments, and indirect costs, including long-term

care, missed school, and expenses related to the juvenile and criminal justice systems, due to child abuse and neglect.

Children abuse can have significant and enduring social repercussions. Emotional instability, trust concerns, and trouble establishing healthy relationships are common problems faced by victims. These difficulties may raise one's risk of drug misuse, criminal activities, and mental illnesses. In addition, victims of child abuse may be more inclined to abuse their own children or enter violent relationships, which can continue a cycle of violence. Beyond the individual, child abuse has a social cost on entire communities, increasing crime, homelessness, and the burden on social services.

### **Preventing Misuse and Lessening its Long-term Effects**

Communities can reduce the long-term effects of child abuse and neglect by decreasing the prevalence of these behaviours through basic preventive measures and providing comprehensive, trauma-informed care when abuse occurs. When offering trauma-informed care, professionals consider a child's past trauma and how it may influence their current symptoms or outcomes. Communities should ensure that both public and private organizations have the necessary resources—such as assessments, evidence-based interventions, and trained staff—to offer timely, appropriate care to children and families to prevent abuse and mitigate its effects. Additionally, communities can support various protective factors, which are conditions or characteristics of individuals, families, communities, or society that promote well-being.

Protective factors are conditions or characteristics of individuals, families, communities, or society that promote well-being and reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes, including the long-term effects discussed in this factsheet. These factors can help “buffer” the impact of maltreatment. Research suggests that the following factors can protect victims of child abuse:

#### **At the Individual Level**

- Agency (self-efficacy) and Sense of purpose
- Skills for self-regulation
- Interpersonal abilities
- Skills in resolving issues
- Participating in constructive endeavours

#### **At Relationship Level**

- Parenting competencies
- Peer positivity
- The well-being of parents or caregivers

#### **At Community Level**

- The school environment is positive.
- Consistent living circumstances
- Pleasant surroundings in the community

### **Social Workers' Role in Helping Children Recover from the Long-term Impacts of Childhood Abuse**

When it comes to the rehabilitation of people who have suffered the long-term effects of child abuse, social professionals are indispensable. Their specialist knowledge and caring demeanor play a crucial role in assisting survivors in overcoming the difficult obstacles brought on by such traumatic events.

Social workers frequently start by offering crisis intervention and prompt support. They might help survivors get access to vital services including health care, legal assistance, and safe housing. In addition, they provide treatment and counseling to assist people in processing their traumatic experiences and creating useful coping mechanisms.

In the long run, social workers can help survivors create a network of support, link them to local resources, and fight for their rights. They might also work together with caregivers and families to stop abuse in its tracks and promote positive relationships. Social professionals enable survivors to recover from the long-term impacts of child abuse and start again by offering a secure and encouraging environment.

## **Conclusion**

Child abuse and neglect can have detrimental impacts on society as a whole, increasing costs for services and engagement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, in addition to having serious and long-lasting effects on the victimized kid. However, societies have the authority to curtail abuse, if not outright prohibit it. Evidence-based treatments can strengthen protective factors that reduce the impact of abuse and provide families and communities with the resources needed to prevent abuse from happening. By collaborating with families and communities, child welfare organizations can lead efforts that both meet needs and leverage existing strengths.

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