



What is the Impact of Child Abuse and Neglect?

Child abuse and neglect have immediate and long-term consequences. In addition to negatively impacting the child, child abuse and neglect impacts the family, the school community, and even future generations.

The ability to survive and thrive in the face of child abuse and neglect depends on a variety of factors, including the extent and type of abuse or neglect, whether it was continual or infrequent, the age of the child when abuse was initiated, the child's relationship to the abuser, and how the abuse or neglect was responded to if discovered or disclosed. Outcomes are also dependent on the child's personality traits, inner strength, and the support the child receives from those around them.

According to the publication titled *Child Maltreatment 2008*, the most recent and reliable source of child abuse and neglect data available, children are more likely to be the victims of neglect than any other type of abuse. In 2008, 73.3% of all child abuse victims were victims of neglect. Physical abuse victims represented 16.1% of all victims, sexual abuse 9.1% of all victims, and emotional abuse 7.3% of all victims. The remaining 4.2% of child victims experienced other types of maltreatment such as abandonment, threat of harm, and in-utero drug exposure.

For the majority of school-aged children the impact of child abuse and neglect will not be immediately evident. More often than not, the obvious physical impacts of child abuse, if there are any, are temporary. Physical injuries from child physical abuse such as bruises and broken bones heal. The more damaging and lasting impacts are harder to identify. When obvious physical injuries have healed, the child remains at increased risk of impaired development (link to research on impact of child abuse on brain development <http://main.zerotothree.org/site/DocServer/startingsmart.pdf?docID=2422>). Abuse can impact the child's language development, as well as their physical, and cognitive development. Consequently, the abused child is at greater risk of academic problems and school failure. These children are also at increased risk of social and emotional problems, poor peer relationships, substance use and dependency, risky behaviors, and juvenile delinquency. This is especially true for children who experience early and ongoing abuse and neglect.

The psychological consequences of child abuse and neglect include the immediate effects of isolation, fear, and an inability to trust. When children cannot trust that someone will be there to meet their needs, they tend to develop low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. These difficulties can lead to life-long relationship problems and may also lead to the development of anti-social behavioral traits. These children are also more likely to engage in violent behaviors and to be diagnosed with conduct and personality disorders.

Neglected children are also at considerable risk. These children are more likely than other children to suffer from a serious physical injury due to an accident such as falling, drowning, fire, or ingesting poison. They are also at a greater risk than other children of being physically and sexually abused from an unrelated caretaker, often times a significant other or friend of their parent(s).

It is important to note that some children will not develop behavioral problems, so it cannot be assumed that a lack of behavioral problems is evidence against child abuse or neglect. When there are behavioral problems as a result of child abuse and neglect, they will most likely be related to difficulty following rules, being respectful,

staying in their seats and keeping on-task, temper tantrums, and difficult peer relationships. As children become older they are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors such as stealing, truancy, smoking, cutting (self-mutilation), sexual risk-taking, and alcohol and substance use.

Increased attention is being paid to the findings of several studies on the long-term health outcomes of a large sample of people. These studies have found that early exposure to adverse childhood experiences including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; neglect; violence; household dysfunction; parental substance abuse or mental illness; and an absent parent are strong predictors of later health problems and early mortality. These studies found that the more adverse experiences in childhood, the greater the likelihood of health and social problems as an adult, including risk taking behaviors and a shortened life-span. For more information link to the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) study at www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/ace

Direct costs to communities include the financial costs of responding to reports of abuse and neglect, caring for children who have been removed from their homes, court and legal costs, and the costs of providing services to families involved in the child welfare system. Indirect costs to the community include increased expenditures to the educational system for special education services, increased use of health care, the costs associated with providing mental health and substance abuse treatment services to adults and juveniles, and responding to increased juvenile and adult crime.

Perhaps the most important impact of child abuse and neglect is the longer-term impact to families. When children grow up in homes where their needs are not met, and if they later become parents themselves, they often have not learned effective parenting skills. They also may lack the social skills to obtain help, and experience emotional problems that impact their ability to receive help that is offered. As adults, the victims of childhood abuse can feel hopeless, helpless, mistrustful, and often depressed. They are more likely to have substance abuse problems, experience domestic violence, and engage in criminal behaviors which complicate and compound their problems. Therefore, as adults, these children are more likely to fall into the vicious cycle of failing to meet the needs of their children. This unfortunate repetition impacts future generations, our communities, and our society as a whole. The impact of child abuse and neglect over the life cycle points to the importance of primary prevention, and the critical role that schools can play as a vehicle for child abuse prevention education directed to children and families.

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