



A paper on Awareness and the Role of Media on Child Abuse

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Abstract

This paper reviews and integrates research knowledge about the impact of different forms of child maltreatment-physical abuse and neglect. Both the short-term impact on the child and the long-term impact on the adolescent and adult are considered. A developmental perspective guides the review. Research studies on these forms of child maltreatment which meet certain criteria (e.g., an appropriate comparison group) are reviewed with the aim of understanding how the experience of child abuse or neglect interferes with development at the time it is experienced and how it may affect the resolution of later developmental processes or tasks as the individual goes through adolescence and then adulthood. Evidence about the role of other mediating factors such as gender and other individual difference variables, characteristics of maltreatment, and family environment is also presented. Gaps in knowledge are noted, and recommendations are made for future research.

Introduction

One of the biggest social stigmas attached to a society is that of child abuse. A child can be abused physically, sexually or mentally. It can be in the form of injury, neglect. Or negligent treatment, blaming, forced sexual stimulation and activity, incest exploitation and sexual abuse. Child abuse can take place in homes, schools, orphanages, residential care facilities, on the streets, in the workplace, in prisons and in places of detention. Violence in any form has a very deep impact on the overall development of the child. Child abuse results in actual or potential harm to the Childs health, survival, development and dignity.



Child Abuse

Child abuse is defined as a non-accidental behavior by parents, caregivers, or any other adults that is outside the norms of conduct and can cause physical or emotional harm to a child or a young person (Bromfield, 2005).

Types of Abuse

There are five main types of child abuse:

1. physical abuse
2. emotional maltreatment
3. neglect
4. sexual abuse

Physical Abuse

Defined as non-accidental trauma or physical injury caused by punching, beating, kicking, biting, burning or otherwise harming a child, physical abuse is the most visible form of child maltreatment. Many times, physical abuse results from inappropriate or excessive physical discipline. A parent or caretaker in anger may be unaware of the magnitude of force with which he or she strikes the child. Other factors that can contribute to child abuse include parents' immaturity, lack of parenting skills, poor childhood experiences and social isolation, as well as frequent crisis situations, drug or alcohol problems and domestic violence.

Signs of Physical Child abuse:

- **Physical signs.** Sometimes physical abuse has clear warning signs, such as unexplained bruises, welts, or cuts. While all children will take a tumble now and then, look for age-inappropriate injuries, injuries that appear to have a pattern such as marks from a hand or belt, or a pattern of severe injuries.
- **Behavioral signs.** Other times, signs of physical abuse may be more subtle. The child may be fearful, shy away from touch or appear to be afraid to go home. A child's clothing



may be inappropriate for the weather, such as heavy, long sleeved pants and shirts on hot days.

- **Caregiver signs.** Physically abusive caregivers may display anger management issues and excessive need for control. Their explanation of the injury might not ring true, or may be different from an older child's description of the injury.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is defined as an inappropriate verbal or symbolic act towards a child that can lead to child's problems on a psychological level.

There are five main kinds of psychological maltreatment:

- **Rejecting:** the adult refuses to acknowledge the child's worth and the legitimacy of the child's needs;
- **Isolating:** the adult cuts the child off from normal social experiences, prevents the child from forming friendships, and makes the child believe that he or she is alone in the world;
- **Terrorizing:** the adult verbally assaults the child, creates a climate of fear, bullies and frightens the child, and makes the child believe that the world is capricious and hostile;
- **Ignoring:** the adult deprives the child of essential stimulation and responsiveness, stifling emotional growth and intellectual development;
- **Corrupting:** the adult "mis-socializes" the child, stimulates the child to engage in destructive antisocial behaviour, reinforces that deviance, and makes the child unfit for normal social experience (Garbarino et al. (1986) p. 8)

Signs of Emotional Child abuse:

- **Behavioral signs.** Since emotional child abuse does not leave concrete marks, the effects may be harder to detect. Is the child excessively shy, fearful or afraid of doing something wrong? Behavioral extremes may also be a clue. A child may be constantly trying to parent other children for example, or on the opposite side exhibit antisocial behavior such as uncontrolled aggression. Look for inappropriate age behaviors as well, such as an older child exhibiting behaviors more commonly found in younger children.



- **Caregiver signs.** Does a caregiver seem unusually harsh and critical of a child, belittling and shaming him or her in front of others? Has the caregiver shown anger or issues with control in other areas? A caregiver may also seem strangely unconcerned with a child's welfare or performance. Keep in mind that there might not be immediate caregiver signs. Tragically, many emotionally abusive caregivers can present a kind outside face to the world, making the abuse of the child all the more confusing and scary.

Neglect

Another kind of abuse is neglect. It means that either parents, or caregivers do not provide children with enough care as it is expected compared with the norms of society. It consequently can affect child's physical and psychological development.

Signs of Neglect

- physical neglect: characterized by the care giver's failure to provide basic physical necessities, such as safe, clean and adequate clothing, housing, food and health care;
- emotional (or psychological) neglect: characterized by a lack of caregiver warmth, nurturance, encouragement and support (note that emotional neglect is sometimes considered a form of emotional maltreatment);
- educational neglect: characterized by a care giver's failure to provide appropriate educational opportunities for the child; and,
- environmental neglect: characterized by the care giver's failure to ensure environmental safety, opportunities and resources (Dubowitz, Pitts, & Black, 2004)

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is defined as a use of a child in any sexual activity, with or without consent, and often without child's understanding. Sexual abuse can happen within a family between family members, with an adult with no familiar relation to a child, or an adult that is in a position of power and authority over the child.



Signs of Sexual abuse might include:

- **Behavioral signs.** Does the child display knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to his or her age, or even seductive behavior? A child might appear to avoid another person, or display unusual behavior- either being very aggressive or very passive. Older children might resort to destructive behaviors to take away the pain, such as alcohol or drug abuse, self-mutilation, or suicide attempts.
- **Physical signs.** A child may have trouble sitting or standing, or have stained, bloody or torn underclothes. Swelling, bruises, or bleeding in the genital area is a red flag. An STD or pregnancy, especially under the age of 14, is a strong cause of concern.
- **Caregiver signs.** The caregiver may seem to be unusually controlling and protective of the child, limiting contact with other children and adults. Again, as with other types of abuse, sometimes the caregiver does not give outward signs of concern. This does not mean the child is lying or exaggerating.
- **The Online risk.** Warning signs of online sexual child abuse are these:
 - Your child spends large amounts of time online, especially at night, and may turn the computer monitor off or quickly change the screen on the monitor when you come into the room.
 - You find pornography on your child's computer.
 - Your child receives phone calls or mail from people you don't know, or makes calls to numbers that you don't recognize.
 - Your child becomes withdrawn from the family

LAW ENFORCEMENT ROLES

- Prevention/Advocacy
- Reporting
- Support to Child Protective Services
- Immediate Response
- Investigative Role
- Victim Support



Child protection code of conduct

DON'TS:

- Have any expectations about helping to heal the child.
- Hit or otherwise physically assault or physically abuse children
- Develop physical/sexual relationship with children
- Develop relationships with children which could in any way be deemed exploitative or abusive
- Behave physically in a manner which is inappropriate or sexually provocative
- Act in ways intended to shame, humiliate, belittle or degrade children, or otherwise perpetrate any form of emotional abuse
- Discriminate against, show differential treatment, or favour particular children to the exclusion of others.
- Spend excessive time alone with children away from others.
- This is not an exhaustive or exclusive list. The principle is that the Care-giver should avoid actions or behaviour, which may be construed as poor practice or potentially abusive.

DO'S:

- Plan and organize the work and the workplace so as to minimize risks
- As far as possible, be visible in working with children
- Ensure that a culture of openness exists to enable any issues or concerns to be raised and discussed
- Empower children - discuss with them their rights, what is acceptable and unacceptable, and what they can do if there is a problem.



Role of Media

The media play a significant role in forming and influencing people's attitudes and behaviour. Issues Paper 14, *Child abuse and the media* (Goddard and Saunders 2001), drew attention to the essential role of the media in increasing society's awareness of, and response to, child abuse and neglect. Of particular note was the part played by news and features that reported on specific child abuse cases, research and intervention strategies. Such media attention to child abuse has, at times, positively influenced public, professional and political responses to the circumstances in which children and young people find themselves. Understanding media influences, and how to use the media constructively, may thus be an essential tool for those who advocate for children, young people, and their families.

In addition to news stories, feature articles, and investigative journalism, sporadic mass media education and prevention campaigns are launched. These campaigns usually endeavour to broaden community knowledge of child abuse and neglect, to influence people's attitudes towards children and young people, and to change behaviours that contribute to, or precipitate, the problem of child abuse and neglect in our communities.

Conclusion

Professional standards related to child abuse and neglect also may be relevant for child care providers. For example, the Ethics Commission of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a national accreditation body for early childhood programs, developed a Code of Ethical Conduct for professionals who work directly with children and families.. The following are samples of principles from the code:

“We shall be familiar with the symptoms of child abuse, including physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse, and neglect. We shall know and follow State laws and community procedures that protect children against abuse and neglect.”

“When we have reasonable cause to suspect child abuse or neglect, we shall report it to the appropriate community agency and follow up to ensure that appropriate action has been taken. When appropriate, parents or guardians will be informed that the referral has been made.”



“We shall involve the family in significant decisions affecting their child.”

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