



Unit 3 Understanding Child Maltreatment

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand the most important terminology in child protection
- ✓ Discuss the long-term effects of various types of abuse
- ✓ Draw distinctions between the different types of abuse and neglect

Unit 3

Understanding Child Maltreatment?

Child maltreatment is formally described as “all forms of physical and/or emotional ill treatment, (sexual) abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.” As the term includes abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation, it is used throughout this module.

The maltreatment of children is recognized across the world as a major public health, human rights, legal and social problem. Child maltreatment is a complicated issue. It occurs in many different settings and in every culture, country and context. Consequently, exact numbers of child victims are difficult to combine. Huge amounts of time, effort and money are spent on prevention and support services for victims. The nature, severity and consequences of maltreatment can vary widely.

The consequences depend on the duration, frequency and intensity of the maltreatment; the victim’s age; the perpetrator’s age; the perpetrator’s relationship to the victim; and the rehabilitation/remedial services the victim receives. In the most serious of cases, maltreatment result in death.

Those responsible for the maltreatment can be anyone, including but not limited to our parents, family members or caregivers; friends or acquaintances; strangers; people in positions of authority such as teachers, soldiers or police officers; employers; health care workers; and other children.

Types of Child Maltreatment

The most prevalent types of child maltreatment are as follows:

- Abuse
- Exploitation
- Violence and;
- Neglect

The first unit provided an overall introduction to what child protection is, defining it as Measures and structures to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence affecting children.

This subsequent unit seeks to expand on the above definition, deepening the discussion and understanding of what different types of abuse, exploitation and violence are. First the definitions of the terms are presented before the types of abuses are explained in more detail.

What is Abuse?

Abuse refers to the deliberate act of ill treatment that can harm or is likely to cause harm to a child's safety, wellbeing, dignity and development. It encompasses all forms of physical, sexual, psychological and emotional mistreatment. Abuse is typically divided into four different types:

1. **Physical abuse** the use of violent physical force so as to cause actual or likely physical injury or suffering (e.g. hitting, shaking, burning, torture).
2. **Emotional or psychological abuse** includes humiliating and degrading treatment such as name calling, constant criticism, belittling, persistent shaming, solitary confinement and isolation.
3. **Sexual abuse** incorporates all forms of sexual mistreatment and exploitation including incest, early and forced marriage, rape, involvement in pornography and sexual slavery. Child sexual abuse also includes indecent touching or exposure, using sexually explicit language towards a child and showing children pornographic material.

Exploitation

Child exploitation refers to the use of children for another person's economic or sexual advantage, gratification or profit, typically resulting in unjust, cruel and harmful treatment of the child.

Detailed below are some of the most prevalent forms of child exploitation around the world:

- **Child labor:** The International Labour Organization (ILO), an agency of the U.N., uses two different terms to make a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable activity for children: work and labor. According to the ILO, children are able to work to a limited extent. This includes light activities, unpaid and paid, such as helping parents at home for short periods or activities for pocket money that do not interfere with the education and development of children. Such activities are regarded as helpful for the development of children, contributing to their self-esteem, self-confidence and well-being.

Labor, by contrast, is perceived as unpaid and paid activities that are mentally, physically, emotionally, socially or morally detrimental to children. Labor is used in reference to work that interferes with the development and education of children. The ILO places major emphasis on the age of a child to distinguish between labor and work.

According to the ILO, children engaged in types of work for which they have not yet reached the specified minimum age are child laborers. Many types of labor children are involved in, girls particularly, are invisible, because children usually work in households or the informal sector of the economy (domestic labor).

- Hazardous labor: means an activity or occupation that has or leads to adverse effects on a child's safety, health and moral development. Hazardous labor conditions include night work; long working hours; exposure to physical, psychological or sexual abuse; work underground, underwater, at dangerous altitudes or in confined spaces; work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools; and work in dangerous environments that may expose children to substances and temperatures that can harm to their health.
- Sexual exploitation of children can be described as a practice by which a person, usually an adult, achieves sexual gratification, financial gain or advancement through the abuse or exploitation of a children. Examples include trafficking, prostitution, pornography, and stripping. It is widely considered the worst form of child labor. Sexual exploitation of children — a type of sexual abuse — includes exploitation for commercial sex. Exploitation for commercial sex is a form of coercion and violence against children that amounts to forced labor and a form of modern slavery.

Child Trafficking

Child trafficking occurs within countries, across national borders, and across continents. It is closely connected with the demand for cheap labor in sectors and among employers where working conditions grossly violate human rights. Children are trafficked to work in environments that are unacceptable as well as dangerous to health and development. Examples of which include bonded labour, camel jockeying, child domestic labor, commercial sexual exploitation, drug couriering, and child slavery.

Violence

Violence against children is used in reference to all forms of physical or mental injury, abuse, neglect or exploitation. Violence can be perpetrated by individuals, by groups and organizations. Its results are injury, fear of injury and fundamental interference with personal freedom.

According to the World Health Organisation (2002), violence is: **“the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a child, by an individual or group, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity.”**

Harm results from the exploitation, violence, abuse and neglect of children and can take many forms, such as impacts on children's physical, emotional and behavioural development their general health, their family, and social relationships, their self-esteem, their educational attainment and their aspirations.

Child abuse puts a child's survival and development in jeopardy, reinforces discrimination, denies any meaningful participation of the child in matters that affect them and **is absolutely not in the best interests of the child.**

Physical Abuse

Physical Abuse refers to the use of physical force so as to cause actual or likely physical injury or suffering (e.g. hitting, shaking, burning, female genital mutilation, torture).

Corporal or Physical Punishment (and the threat of it) is the deliberate use of pain for punishment.

This includes hitting the child with the hand or with an object (such as a cane, belt, whip, shoe, etc); kicking, shaking, or throwing the child, pinching or pulling their hair; forcing a child to stay in uncomfortable or undignified positions, or to take excessive physical exercise; and burning or scarring the child.

What is the Impact of Physical Abuse?

Physical Effects

The effects of physical punishment include physical pain, minor cuts and bruises, serious injuries and even permanent physical disability.

Psychosocial Effects

Although the physical consequences are more immediate and obvious, it is the long term psychosocial consequences of abuse that are most concerning. No matter what their age, children's developing minds are damaged by violent treatment. There is a connection between physical and psychological punishment and depression, low self-esteem, negative psychological health and poor relationships.

Just a few of the potential psychosocial consequences of the physical punishment of children include the following:

- It affects children's self-esteem, teaching them poor self-control and promoting negative expectations of themselves, resulting in a sense of worthlessness.
- It interferes with their education and with their cognitive, sensory and emotional development.

- It discourages the use of reasoning. By removing dialogue and reflection, it inhibits their capacity to understand the relationship between behaviour and its consequences.
- It makes children feel lonely, sad and abandoned, negatively affecting their confidence in society as a protective environment.
- It promotes a negative view of other people and of society as a whole.
- It can quickly lead to a loss of interest in education.
- It creates barriers that block parent-child and/or teacher-child communication and damages the emotional links between them.
- It can stimulate anger and the desire to run away from the school or home.
- It gives the impression that violence is acceptable behaviour, and that it is alright for a stronger person to use force to coerce a weaker one.

Sexual Abuse

Definition of Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse and exploitation is a major global issue. It exists in every culture regardless of wealth and religion. Child sexual abuse and exploitation is often predictable and preventable.

Sexual Abuse incorporates all forms of sexual violence including incest, early and forced marriage, rape, involvement in pornography, and sexual slavery. Child sexual abuse includes indecent touching, penetration and sexual torture, as well as indecent exposure, using sexually explicit language towards a child and showing children pornographic material.

Save the Children states that all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation under the general definition of child sexual abuse. Child sexual abuse refers to the immediate abusive act towards a child and is the basis of the exploitation of the child. The legal age of consent defines when a child is regarded mature enough to consent to sexual activity of any kind.

Those who abuse children may have an emotional or professional relationship with the child, where their own trust and power is exploited. This is why sexual abuse is considered a particularly difficult as most offences are committed by people known by the child. Children may also be sexually abused or exploited by abusers or third parties who were not known to the child or their family.

Impact of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse and exploitation usually have a devastating effect on the physical and mental health of children, and also on their families and communities.

Individual Impact: the consequences of sexual exploitation on the individual child can be catastrophic, and can affect them on several levels:

Physical Consequences: can include genital injury, sexually transmitted diseases and the contraction of HIV/AIDS. Research suggests that adolescent girls are more likely to contract HIV from a single sexual contact than are adult women. Unwanted pregnancy can have further consequences like stigmatisation and unsafe abortions;

Emotional Consequences can include distress and long-term psychological health problems. In some societies, the sense of shame associated with being violated can have severe consequences for the child;

Social Consequences can include ostracism by the family or community - especially if the child is disbelieved or blamed for what has happened. In some cultures, sexual exploitation will have a negative impact on the child's chances of marrying;

Secondary Trauma: can occur if the incident is handled insensitively. This includes interviewing the child in an insensitive way (e.g. by the police), insensitive medical examination, or those in authority disbelieving the child or even blaming him/her for the incident. These can all inflict further harm on the child.

The Effects of Abuse on Children are both Long and Short Term.

Short term effects:

- Feelings of powerlessness
- Anger
- Fear
- Increased anxiety
- Phobias (fears of specific objects, places or people)
- Nightmares
- Difficulty concentrating
- Flashbacks of the event

Long Term Effects

- Psychological problems including depression and anxiety
- Psychosomatic problems (continual unexplained illnesses)
- Difficulties with trust and intimacy in relationships
- Suicide or suicide attempts
- Substance abuse including alcohol or drugs
- Delinquency (stealing and breaking the law)

Emotional Abuse

Emotional Abuse Defined

Emotional or Psychological Abuse refers to humiliating and degrading treatment like name calling, constant criticism, belittling, persistent shaming, solitary confinement and isolation.

Emotional abuse is a form of brain washing that gradually eats away at the victim's self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in their own perceptions and life quality.

Indicators that emotional abuse could be happening include when a person:

- Constantly blames or puts down child
- Acts in a cold and rejecting manner towards the child
- Is indifferent to child's problems or welfare
- Withholds affection
- Shows preferential treatment to other children in the family or in the group.

Neglect

Neglect refers to the persistent failure of a parent or adult caregiver to provide the required level of care to a child, despite their ability to do so. Neglect is typically an ongoing pattern of inadequate care that can be observed by people in close contact with the child. Indicators of child neglect are poor hygiene, poor weight gain and growth, inadequate medical care and frequent absences from school or day care.

Neglect is sometimes referred to as the 'passive' form of abuse because it relates to a failure to carry out key aspect of the care and protection of children which results in the significant impairment of the child's health or development, affecting their emotional and social development.

There are different types of neglect:

- Physical neglect is used in reference to the consistent failure to provide a child with basic necessities including food, shelter, or clothing. Child abandonment, inadequate supervision, and failure to keep a child safe are also forms of neglect. Physical neglect can severely impact a child's development, by causing failure to develop healthily, malnutrition, and serious illnesses.
- Medical neglect refers to failure to provide necessary health services to a child, subsequently placing the child's health and life in jeopardy. Examples include when a parent refuses to seek medical help for a child who has an acute illness, or when a parent

ignores professional recommendations for a child with a treatable chronic disease or disability, resulting in frequent hospitalizations or a significant deterioration of the child's condition.

- Emotional neglect is the consistent failure to provide affection, stimulation, nurturance and encouragement to a child. Severe emotional neglect of an infant's need for stimulation and nurturance can result in the infant failing to thrive and even in the infant's death. Emotional neglect can also lead to the child's poor self-image and self-esteem, and to alcohol or drug abuse and other destructive behaviors later in life.
- Educational neglect is the failure to ensure a child of mandatory school age goes to school or provide appropriate home schooling. Educational neglect can lead to the child failing to acquire basic life skills and can pose a serious threat to their psychological, emotional, and social development and well-being, particularly when the child has special educational needs that are not met. In many cultures, girls are more likely to experience educational neglect than boys.

Impact of Maltreatment on Children

The physical, or psychological and developmental consequences of child maltreatment vary from deep emotional issues to serious injury and death.

A maltreated child is more likely to:

- Have low self-esteem
- Exhibit extremely passive or aggressive behaviors
- Have difficulties with interpersonal relationships
- Perform poorly in school
- Have frequent nightmares
- Experience depression that can lead to suicide attempts

Emotional abuse:

- Destroys children's self-confidence and self-esteem
- Results in a sense of worthlessness and inadequacy
- Leaves deep psychological scars which can last a lifetime

Violence can lead to:

- Severe physical harm
- Torment and feelings of shame and guilt (children feel they are responsible for the abuse or that somehow they brought it upon themselves)

- Self-loathing, relationship issues, sexual problems such as an inability to maintain intimate relationships

Studies have shown that exposure to maltreatment and other forms of violence during childhood is associated with elevated risk-taking behaviors later in life. These include violent victimization and the perpetration of violence, depression, smoking, obesity, high-risk sexual activities resulting in sexually transmitted infections (STIs), early pregnancy, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Children who have experienced maltreatment can also be more vulnerable to HIV, as forced or coerced sex may lead to HIV transmission. Moreover, violence and threats of violence may inhibit a person's ability to build a safe attitude towards sex in general.

Along with these health and social costs, child maltreatment has a major economic impact on families, communities and entire countries. Families are hit with the costs of medical care and psychosocial or psychological and legal services; curtailed education may result in lost earnings. For communities and countries as a whole, maltreatment can lead to a loss in productivity and tax revenues, due to illness and premature death, and an increase in government expenditures for medical care, special education, psychological and welfare services, protective services, foster care, prevention and prosecution of adult crimes and the imprisonment of juveniles and adult offenders.

Further Reading: