



Unit 5

Consequences of 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 5

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Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect

Aside from the immediate physical injuries children can experience through maltreatment, a child's reactions to abuse or neglect can have lifelong and even intergenerational impacts. Childhood maltreatment can be linked to later physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences as well as costs to society as a whole. These consequences may be independent of each other, but they also may be interrelated. For example, abuse or neglect may stunt physical development of the child's brain and lead to psychological problems, such as low self-esteem, which could later lead to high-risk behaviors, such as substance use.

The outcomes for each child may vary widely and are affected by a combination of factors, including the child's age and developmental status when the maltreatment occurred; the type, frequency, duration, and severity of the maltreatment; and the relationship between the child and the perpetrator. Additionally, children who experience maltreatment often are affected by other adverse experiences (e.g., parental substance use, domestic violence, poverty), which can make it difficult to separate the unique effects of maltreatment (Rosen, Handley, Cicchetti, & Rogosch, 2018).

Physical Health Consequences

Some long-term physical effects of abuse or neglect may occur immediately (e.g., brain damage caused by head trauma), but others can take months or years to emerge or be detectable. There is a straightforward link between physical abuse and physical health, but it is also important to recognize that maltreatment of any type can cause long-term physical consequences.

Childhood maltreatment has been linked to higher risk for a wide range of long-term and/or future health problems, including—but not limited to—the following:

- Diabetes
- Lung disease
- Malnutrition
- Vision problems
- Functional limitations (i.e., being limited in activities)
- Heart attack
- Arthritis
- Back problems
- High blood pressure
- Brain damage
- Migraine headaches

- Chronic bronchitis/emphysema/chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Cancer
- Stroke
- Bowel disease
- Chronic fatigue syndrome.

Child abuse and neglect also has been associated with certain regions of the brain failing to form, function, or grow properly. For example, a history of maltreatment may be correlated with reduced volume in overall brain size and may affect the size and/or functioning of the brain (Bick & Nelson, 2016).

Additionally, the type of maltreatment a child experiences can increase the risk for specific physical health conditions. For example, one study found that children who experienced neglect were at increased risk for diabetes, poorer lung functioning, and vision and oral health problems. Children who had been physically abused were at higher risk for diabetes and malnutrition. Children who were victims of sexual abuse were more likely to contract hepatitis C and HIV.

Psychological Consequences

Child abuse and neglect can cause a variety of psychological problems. Maltreatment can cause victims to feel isolation, fear, and distrust, which can translate into lifelong psychological consequences that can manifest as educational difficulties, low self-esteem, depression, and trouble forming and maintaining relationships. Researchers have identified links between child abuse and neglect and the following psychological outcomes.

Diminished Executive Functioning and Cognitive Skills

Disrupted brain development as a result of maltreatment can cause impairments to the brain's executive functions: working memory, self-control, and cognitive flexibility (i.e., the ability to look at things and situations from different perspectives). Children who were maltreated also are at risk for other cognitive problems, including difficulties learning and paying attention.

Poor Mental and Emotional Health

Experiencing childhood maltreatment is a risk factor for depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric disorders throughout adulthood. Studies have found that adults with a history of ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) had a higher prevalence of suicide attempts than those who did not.

Attachment and Social Difficulties

Infants in foster care who have experienced maltreatment followed by disruptions in early caregiving can develop attachment disorders. Attachment disorders can negatively affect a child's ability to form positive peer, social, and romantic relationships later in life (Doyle & Cicchetti, 2017).

Posttraumatic Stress (PTSD)

Children who experienced abuse or neglect can develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is characterized by symptoms such as persistent re-experiencing of the traumatic events related to the

abuse; avoiding people, places, and events that are associated with their maltreatment; feeling fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame; startling easily; and exhibiting hypervigilance, irritability, or other changes in mood. PTSD in children can lead to depression, suicidal behavior, substance use, and oppositional or defiant behaviors well into adulthood, which can affect their ability to succeed in school, and create and nurture important relationships.

Behavioral Consequences

Victims of child abuse and neglect often exhibit behavioral difficulties even after the maltreatment ends. The following are examples of how maltreatment can affect individuals' behaviors as adolescents and adults.

Unhealthy Sexual Practices

Studies suggest that abused or neglected children are more likely to engage in sexual risk-taking as they reach adolescence, including a higher number of sexual partners, earlier initiation of sexual behavior, and transactional sex (i.e., sex exchanged for money, gifts, or other material support), which increases their chances of contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

Alcohol and other Drug use

Adults who had been maltreated as children are at a significantly higher risk of substance use disorders than adults who have not been maltreated.

Societal Consequences

Although the physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences of child abuse and neglect weigh heavily on the shoulders of the children who experience it, the impact of maltreatment does not end there. Society pays a price for child abuse and neglect in both direct costs (e.g., hospitalizations, foster care payments) and indirect costs (e.g., long-term care, lost productivity at school, juvenile and criminal justice systems costs).

Preventing and Reducing the Long Term Consequences of Maltreatment

By reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect through primary prevention approaches and providing comprehensive, trauma-informed care when it does occur, communities can limit its long-term consequences. In trauma-informed care, service professionals acknowledge a child's history of trauma and how that trauma can have an impact on the symptoms—or consequences—being experienced by the child.

Communities can ensure that public and private agencies have the tools—such as assessments, evidence-informed interventions, and properly trained staff—to provide children and their families with timely, appropriate care to prevent child maltreatment and alleviate its effects.

Communities can also promote a variety of protective factors for children. Protective factors are conditions or attributes of individuals, families, communities, or society that promote well-being and reduce the risk for negative outcomes. They can “buffer” the effects of maltreatment. Research shows the following are protective factors for victims of child maltreatment:

Individual Level

- Sense of purpose
- Agency (self-efficacy)
- Self-regulation skills
- Relational skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Involvement in positive activities

Relationship Level

- Parenting competencies
- Positive peers
- Parent or caregiver well-being.

Community Level

- Positive school environment
- Stable living situation
- Positive community environment.

Child abuse and neglect can have devastating and long-lasting effects on a child and can result in detrimental societal impacts, including high costs for services and increased involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems. However, communities can act to stem the effects of maltreatment and even prevent it. Evidence-based services and supports can promote protective factors that mitigate the effects of maltreatment as well as provide families and communities with the tools to stop maltreatment before it occurs. Child welfare agencies can work with families and communities to spearhead initiatives that build upon strengths and address needs.

Further Reading:

- ✓ Bacon, H., & Richardson, S. (2001). Attachment theory and child abuse: An overview of the literature for practitioners. *Child Abuse Review*
- ✓ Higgins, D. (2004). Differentiating between child maltreatment experiences. *Family Matters*
- ✓ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2008). Long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect Retrieved 5 November 2009