

Child Abuse and Neglect - The Emotional Effect

What is Child Abuse?

All parents upset their children sometimes. Saying 'No' and managing difficult behaviour is an essential part of parenting. Tired or stressed parents can lose control and do or say something they regret, and may even harm the child. 'Abuse' is defined as significant harm to health or development caused by physical punishment, injury, verbal threats or sexual abuse. It can also be caused by neglect. This occurs when a parent fails to provide adequate care for the child, for example, sufficient food, stimulation or supervision to ensure safety, so it harms their health and development. Children are usually abused within the family or by familiar adults, but sometimes older children and occasionally strangers are involved.

How are children affected by abuse?

The effects of abuse vary enormously and depend on:

- The type of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional or neglect)
- The severity
- Whether the child has been abused over a long period of time
- The child's age and vulnerability
- The care and protection the child normally receives at home

Occasional physical chastisement by a consistent and loving parent will cause relatively short-term distress, particularly when the child understands the reason, for example a teenager hit by a parent after very aggressive or worrying behaviour. In contrast, a child will suffer severe long-term consequences if they experience violent attacks or sexual abuse by a parent who is also inconsistent or neglectful. Serious physical or sexual assault by a stranger is likely to cause very distressing fears, flashbacks and disturbance of sleep and concentration.

Behavior that may be caused by physical abuse

- Fearful watchful child who does not play spontaneously
- Aggressive behavior at school, home or both
- Bullying behaviour or being the victim of bullying
- Poor concentration and under-achievement at school
- Temper tantrums, impulsive out of control behaviour
- Antisocial behaviour such as lying, stealing, truancy, delinquency
- Difficulty in forming trusting relationships

Behavior that may be caused by sexual abuse

- Low self- esteem
- Sexualised play or behaviour
- Passive withdrawn behaviour, secretiveness
- Poor concentration and under-achievement at school
- Onset of wetting, soiling, sleep problems
- Inappropriate behaviour or seductiveness with adults
- Excessive fearfulness and fear of physical contact
- Depression, overdose or suicidal behaviour

- Running away, promiscuity or prostitution
- Alcohol or drug misuse, anorexia or bulimia

There may be a sudden change in behaviour when the abuse begins. Long standing abuse by an adult to whom the child's close is harder to detect. The child may be very fearful of revealing it because of the threats made to the child by the abusing adult.

Behavior that may be caused by emotional abuse or neglect

Emotional abuse or neglect may result in:

- Developmental delay
- Poor language development
- Passivity, lack of spontaneity
- Feeding problems, failure to thrive
- Lack of close relationships
- Over familiarity with adults the child does not know well
- Poor peer relationships and lack of imaginative play
- Low self-esteem
- Distractibility and failure at school

What can help?

Firstly the child must be protected from further abuse. Social service or appropriate agency need to be involved to establish what has happened, if it is likely to happen again and what steps are needed to protect the child. In developed countries (e.g. U.K), the child's name may be placed on the child protection register. If social service or other agency is satisfied that the parents can care for and protect the child in future they will remain involved only if the family wants their help.

When abuse has taken place within the family, the person involved is sometimes able to take responsibility for what has happened and ask for help. They can then be helped to improve their care of the child. Occasionally the child may have to be separated temporarily or permanently from the abusing adult because the risks of physical and emotional harm are too great.

The family doctor will be able to offer you help and advice. Many children need specialist treatment because they have been harmed. When referred to a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service like ours, the team of psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists and social workers will be able to help. They may work with the whole family or with children and adolescents alone or in groups. Individual therapy is especially helpful for children who have been sexually abused or who have experienced severe trauma. Children who have suffered serious abuse or neglect can be difficult to care for and the service can offer help and advice to parents and careers.

Adapted from 'Fact sheets' published by Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Section, Royal College of Psychiatrists, U.K. The information sheets may be duplicated and distributed free of charge provided the Center for Child and Adolescent Mental Health is credited and no profit is gained from the use.

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