

Child abuse and neglect

Reports of infanticide, mutilation, abandonment and other forms of physical and sexual violence against children are widespread. Child abuse is a global problem that is deeply rooted in cultural, economic and social practices.

- eating and sleep disorders
- poor school performance
- poor relationships
- reproductive health problems
- post-traumatic stress disorder
- depression and anxiety
- suicidal behaviour and self-harm.

THE EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

- An estimated 57 000 children were victims of homicide in the year 2000. Many child deaths, however, are not routinely investigated or autopsied making it difficult to know the true extent of the problem.
- The highest rates of fatal child abuse are found among children aged 0-4 years. The most common cause of death is head injury, followed by abdominal injuries and intentional suffocation.
- Deaths are only the visible tip of the problem. Millions of children are victims of non-fatal abuse and neglect. In some studies, between one-quarter and one-half of children report severe and frequent physical abuse, including being beaten, kicked or tied up by parents.
- Available data also suggests that about 20% of women and 5-10% of men suffered sexual abuse as children.
- A substantial amount of harsh punishment in the form of hitting, punching, kicking or beating also occurs in schools and other institutions.
- Many children are subjected to psychological or emotional abuse as well as neglect, though the true extent of these problems are not known.

Many of these problems, in turn, increase the likelihood of several major adult forms of illness and disease.

WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS FOR CHILD ABUSE?

Research has linked certain characteristics of the child and caregiver, as well as features of the family environment, to child abuse and neglect.

Vulnerability to child abuse – whether physical, sexual or through neglect – depends in part on the child's age and sex. Young children are most at risk of physical abuse, whereas the highest rates of sexual abuse are found among children who have reached puberty or adolescence.

In most places, boys are the victims of beatings and physical punishment more often than girls, while girls are at higher risk of infanticide, sexual abuse, forced prostitution, and educational and nutritional neglect. Globally, more than 130 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 years are not in school, 60% of whom are girls.

Other factors that increase a child's vulnerability to abuse include:

- being raised by a single parent or by very young parents without the support of an extended family
- household overcrowding
- a lack of income to meet the family's needs
- the presence of other violent relationships in the home.

Parents more likely to abuse their children tend to have low self-esteem, poor control over their impulses, mental health problems and to display antisocial behaviour. They also tend to be uninformed and have unrealistic expectations about child development.

Research also shows that child maltreatment is more likely in communities with high rates of poverty and fewer of the social networks and neighbourhood support systems that have been shown to protect children.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Ill health caused by child abuse forms a significant portion of the global burden of disease.

Apart from physical injuries such as bruises and welts, burns and scalds, lacerations and fractures, child maltreatment is associated with a number of other consequences, including:

- alcohol and drug abuse
- cognitive impairment and developmental delays
- delinquent, violent and other risk-taking behaviours



WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

Some of the most effective responses for combating child abuse and neglect focus on child-rearing, parent-child relationships and the family environment, including:

- Training in parenting – providing parents with information about child development as well as attachment and bonding, and teaching them to use consistent child-rearing methods and how to manage family conflict.
- Home visitation programmes – involving regular visits from a nurse or other health professional to the homes of families in special need of support with childcare or where there is an identified risk of child maltreatment. Interventions can include counselling, training and referrals to specialists or other agencies.

Programmes that focus primarily on keeping the family unit intact without necessarily addressing the underlying causes of the problem, however, are less effective. Those that include high levels of participant involvement, using an approach that builds on the strengths of the family, and that involve an element of social support, seem to produce better results than those without these components.

Health care professionals have a key role to play in identifying, treating and referring cases of abuse and neglect and in reporting suspected cases of maltreatment to the appropriate authorities. To facilitate the detection and reporting of abuse, a number of health care organizations have developed training programmes.

While evaluations of these programmes show improvements in health care worker's knowledge of child abuse and neglect, the impact of training programmes on other outcomes, such as improved care and referral for children, is not known.

Other approaches to prevent child abuse and neglect focus on:

- therapy and other services for children who have witnessed or experienced abuse
- treatment programmes for perpetrators
- legal remedies such as arrest and prosecution policies, child protection services and mandatory and voluntary reporting systems to aid in the identification of cases of abuse.

The evidence to date for the effectiveness of these approaches is rather limited. Most have not been adequately evaluated.

Community-based initiatives are also increasingly being used to tackle the problem. While some are school-based – instructing children how to recognize threatening situations and providing them with skills to protect against abuse – others involve the collaboration of many sectors to increase knowledge and awareness, and improve services.

Media and other types of prevention campaigns have also been used to stimulate community action and change behavioural patterns.

Much can be done at the societal level to prevent child abuse and neglect – including measures to tackle poverty, improve educational and employment opportunities, and increase the availability and quality of child care. These measures have the potential to offset social and economic inequalities and improve child outcomes.