Child Abuse: An Overview

Effects of Child Abuse on Children: Abuse in General

Children suffering abuse develop a range of maladaptive, anti-social and self-destructive behaviors and thoughts by trying to cope with the abuse - by trying to understand the situation and why the abuse is happening.

Think of it like this: a person is robbed and beaten while walking down the street at night. In trying to deal with the situation, the person thinks, “I shouldn’t have walked down that street,” or “I shouldn’t have been there at that time of night,” or “I should have walked with someone,” or “I should have made eye contact,” or “I should have given in quicker,” or “I should have fought back,” or any number of other ideas. The point is the person feels a sense of control over the situation if they can blame themselves or something they did for the attack. Instead of the world being a dangerous place where violence occurs at random, the world becomes a safe place within certain behavioral parameters.

Children experience the same kinds of thoughts when they suffer abuse, except they are much more immature and often make much less sense because the violence is occurring in their own family, and nothing makes sense in that situation. And the abuse suffered by children occurs much more frequently. If the adult in the above example is attacked and rugged every week despite changing their behavior each time, it won’t be long before the person starts coming up with bizarre explanations for the violence and becomes afraid to leave the house entirely. If the person has a chance to talk with the attacker after every attack (like in cartoons where the rabbit asks the fox “why did you attack me?”) and the fox comes up with a different silly reason each time or like in child abuse where the victim and the perpetrator interact constantly) the person will be sent through a psychological maze of smoke and mirrors leading to any number of bizarre ideas about how to avoid the attack next week. By coming up with ideas about what they did to cause the abuse and what they can do differently to avoid the abuse, children also develop a range of maladaptive behaviors which can become pathological problems.

In addition to distorting children’s thoughts, abuse also forces children into a position of having to “hide the family secret”. This prevents children from having real relationships and has life-long effects. And because our ability to form healthy social relationships is learned, abused children are deprived of many skills necessary to navigate the social world. Their entire concept of a relationship is distorted. This leads to problematic relationships in life and even on the job.

Another disturbing aspect of abuse is the experiential restraint it puts on children. If a child fears doing anything new because of the chance that it will lead to a violent attack or because an abusive parent keeps extremely tight control over them, the child will lose his or her sense of curiosity and wonder at the world and will stop trying new things and exercising his or her mind. That child will never achieve his or her intellectual potential.

Another aspect of abuse which cannot be ignored is the physical stress it puts on a child. Multiple exposures to violence and trauma cause what’s known as autonomic and endocrine hyperarousal. Basically it means the victim gets stressed out. When a person experiences this hyperarousal over and over again, there are permanent physiological changes. These changes can be seen as over-reactions to stimuli, as in being easily startled especially by things that remind the victim of the original event: craving high-risk, stimuli-stimulating or dangerous experiences or self-injury; difficulties in attention and concentration; cardiovascular problems; and immune suppression which leads to a higher risk for colds and more severe illnesses.

There is a long list of outcomes for children experiencing abuse. They range from mild, almost unnoticeable personality effects to full-blown breakdowns in healthy functioning. The point is that abuse increases a child’s risk of developing a number of health and psychological problems.

**Effects of child abuse:**

- Academic difficulties
- Aggressive behavior
- Alcohol and/or other drug abuse
- Anxiety
- Attention problems
- Bad dreams
- Bed wetting
- Behavior problems
- Chronic pain
- Compulsive sexual behaviors
- Concentration problems
- Dangerous behavior such as speeding
- Dehydration
- Depression
- Dissociative states
- Eating disorders
- Failure to thrive
- Fear or shyness
- Fear of certain adults or places
- Frequent injuries: Injuries; Learning problems: Lying; Malnutrition; Oppositionality; Panic attacks
- Physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches
- Repeated self-injury
- Risky sexual behaviors
- Running away
- Self-neglect
- Separation anxiety
- Sexual dysfunction
- Sleep...
disorders; Social withdrawal; Stealing; Stuttering; Substance abuse; Suicide attempts; Thumb-sucking or any age-inappropriate behavior; Truancy.\textsuperscript{2,3,5,15}

Children have different levels of resiliency or hardness and different personality attributes, so different children respond differently to similarly abusive situations. That's why the lists of warning signs above seems so general. None of the symptoms above is diagnostic of child abuse - i.e., the presence of any of the signs above does not prove that abuse has occurred. Also, a child may endure abuse without developing any of the symptoms above. Abuse simply increases the risk for all of the symptoms. Basically, children are supposed to learn everything they need to thrive in this world from their caretakers. Abusive parents provide the opposites of what children need. Instead of teaching and nurturing growth, they distort and destroy.

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Injuries to Children: Physical and Sexual Abuse
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