



Risk and Protective Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect

This fact sheet is an excerpt from *Emerging Practices in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, (2003) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. The findings and conclusions presented in this fact sheet do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Children's Bureau's Office on Child Abuse and Neglect.

Risk Factors

While there are varying schools of thought on the origins of maltreatment, most theories of child maltreatment recognize that the root causes can be organized into a framework of four principal systems: (1) the child, (2) the family, (3) the community, and (4) the society. Though children are not responsible for the abuse inflicted upon them, certain child characteristics have been found to increase the risk or potential for maltreatment. Children with disabilities or mental retardation, for example, are significantly more likely to be abused (Crosse, Kaye, & Ratnofsky, 1993; Schilling & Schinke, 1984). Evidence also suggests that age and gender are predictive of maltreatment risk. Younger children are more likely to be neglected, while the risk for sexual abuse increases with age (Mraovick & Wilson, 1999). Female children and adolescents are significantly more likely than males to suffer sexual abuse.

Important characteristics of the family are linked with child maltreatment. Families in which there is substance abuse are more likely to experience abuse or are at a higher risk of abuse (Ammerman et al., 1999; Besinger et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993). But, identifying families in which substance abuse is present can be difficult. The Child Welfare League of America (2001) recently found that substance abuse is present in 40 to 80 percent of families in which children are abuse victims. Recent studies also have established a link between having a history of childhood abuse and becoming a victimizer later in life, including Clarke et al. (1999), confirming some of the earliest work in the field. DiLillo, Tremblay, and Peterson (2000) found that childhood sexual abuse increased the risk of perpetrating physical abuse on children as adults. Domestic violence and lack of parenting or communication skills also increase the risks of maltreatment to children.

Factors related to the community and the larger society also are linked with child maltreatment. Poverty, for example, has been linked with maltreatment, particularly neglect, in each of the national incidence studies (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996), and has been associated with child neglect by Black (2000) and found to be a strong predictor of substantiated child maltreatment by Lee and Goerge (1999). Bishop and Leadbeater (1999) found that abusive mothers reported fewer friends in their social support networks, less contact with friends, and lower ratings of quality support received from friends. Violence and unemployment are other community-level variables that have been found to be associated with child maltreatment. Perhaps the least understood and studied level of child maltreatment is that of societal factors. Ecological theories



**Protective
Factors**

postulate that factors such as the narrow legal definitions of child maltreatment, the social acceptance of violence (as evidenced by video games, television and films, and music lyrics), and political or religious views that value noninterference in families above all may be associated with child maltreatment (Tzeng, Jackson, & Karlson, 1991).

Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are now increasingly thinking about *protective* factors within children and families that can reduce risks, build family capacity, and foster resilience. In 1987, case studies of three victims of child maltreatment began to shed light on the dynamics of survival in high-risk settings. Resilience in maltreated children was found to be related to personal characteristics that included a child's ability to: recognize danger and adapt, distance oneself from intense feelings, create relationships that are crucial for support, and project oneself into a time and place in the future in which the perpetrator is no longer present (Mrazek & Mrazek, 1987).

Since then, researchers have continued to explore why certain children with risk factors become victims and other children with the same factors do not. What are the factors that appear to protect children from the risks of maltreatment? In a recent overview by the Family Support Network, factors that may protect children from maltreatment include child factors, parent and family factors, social and environmental factors. Child factors that may protect children include good health, an above-average intelligence, hobbies or interests, good peer relationships, an easy temperament, a positive disposition, an active coping style, positive self-esteem, good social skills, an internal locus of control, and a balance between seeking help and autonomy.

Parent and family protective factors that may protect children include secure attachment with children, parental reconciliation with their own childhood history of abuse, supportive family environment, household rules and monitoring of the child, extended family support, stable relationship with parents, family expectations of pro-social behavior, and high parental education. Social and environmental risk factors that may protect children include middle to high socioeconomic status, access to health care and social services, consistent parental employment, adequate housing, family participation in a religious faith, good schools, and supportive adults outside the family who serve as role models or mentors (Family Support Network, 2002). Some recent studies have found that families with two married parents encounter more stable home environments, fewer years in poverty, and diminished material hardship (Lerman, 2002).

The following two pages summarize common risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect.

Common Risk Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect*

Child Risk Factors

Premature birth, birth anomalies, low birth weight, exposure to toxins *in utero*
Temperament: difficult or slow to warm up
Physical/cognitive/emotional disability, chronic or serious illness
Childhood trauma
Anti-social peer group
Age
Child aggression, behavior problems, attention deficits

Parental/Family Risk Factors

Personality Factors

External locus of control
Poor impulse control
Depression/anxiety
Low tolerance for frustration
Feelings of insecurity
Lack of trust
Insecure attachment with own parents
Childhood history of abuse
High parental conflict, domestic violence
Family structure – single parent with lack of support, high number of children in household
Social isolation, lack of support
Parental psychopathology
Substance abuse
Separation/divorce, especially high conflict divorce
Age
High general stress level
Poor parent-child interaction, negative attitudes and attributions about child's behavior
Inaccurate knowledge and expectations about child development

Social/Environmental Risk Factors

Low socioeconomic status
Stressful life events
Lack of access to medical care, health insurance, adequate child care, and social services
Parental unemployment; homelessness
Social isolation/lack of social support
Exposure to racism/discrimination
Poor schools
Exposure to environmental toxins
Dangerous/violent neighborhood
Community violence

*Please note that this is not an all-inclusive or exhaustive list. These factors do not imply causality and should not be interpreted as such.

Common Protective Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect*

Child Protective Factors

Good health, history of adequate development
Above-average intelligence
Hobbies and interests
Good peer relationships
Personality factors
 Easy temperament
 Positive disposition
 Active coping style
 Positive self-esteem
 Good social skills
 Internal locus of control
 Balance between help seeking and autonomy

Parental/Family Protective Factors

Secure attachment; positive and warm parent-child relationship
Supportive family environment
Household rules/structure; parental monitoring of child
Extended family support and involvement, including caregiving help
Stable relationship with parents
Parents have a model of competence and good coping skills
Family expectations of pro-social behavior
High parental education

Social/Environmental Protective Factors

Mid to high socioeconomic status
Access to health care and social services
Consistent parental employment
Adequate housing
Family religious faith participation
Good schools
Supportive adults outside of family who serve as role models/mentors to child

*Please note that this is not an all-inclusive or exhaustive list. These factors do not imply causality and should not be interpreted as such.

References

- Ammerman, R., Kolko, D., Kirisci, L., Blackson, T., & Dawes, M. (1999). Child abuse potential in parents with histories of substance abuse disorder. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 23, 1225-1238.
- Besinger, B., Garland, A., Litrownik, A., & Landsverk, J. (1999). Caregiver substance abuse among maltreated children placed in out-of-home care. *Child Welfare*, 78(2), 221-239.
- Bishop, S., & Leadbeater, B. (1999). Maternal social support patterns and child maltreatment: Comparison of maltreating and nonmaltreating mothers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 69, 172-181.
- Black, D. A., Heyman, R. E., & Smith Slep, A. M. (2001). Risk factors for child physical abuse. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 6, 121-188.
- Black, M. (2000). The roots of child neglect. In R.M. Reece (Ed.), *Treatment of child abuse: Common mental health, medical, and legal practitioners*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chalk, R., & King, R. A. (1998). *Violence in families: Assessing prevention and treatment programs*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 41-50.
- Child Welfare League of America. (2001). *Alcohol, other drugs, & child welfare*. 2001/0-87868-839-0/#8390. Washington, DC: CWLA.
- Clarke, J., Stein, M., Sobota, M., Marisi, M., & Hanna, L. (1999). Victims as victimizers: Physical aggression by persons with a history of childhood abuse. *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 159, 1920-1924.
- Crosse, S., Kaye, E., & Ratnofsky, A. (1993). *A report on the maltreatment of children with disabilities*. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information.
- Davies, D. (1999). *Child Development: A Practitioner's Guide*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- DiLillo, D., Tremblay, G., & Peterson, L. (2000). Maternal anger. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24(6), 767-779.
- Family Support Network. (2002). *Child abuse and neglect*. Available: <http://www.familysupport.org/Abuse.cfm>.
- Harrington, D., & Dubowitz, H. (1999). Preventing child maltreatment. In R. L. Hampton (Ed.), *Family violence: 2nd edition. Prevention and treatment*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Heyman, R. E., & Smith Slep, A. M. (2001). Risk factors for family violence: Introduction to the special series. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 6, 115-119.
- Lee, B., & Goerge, R. (1999). Poverty, early childbearing, and child maltreatment: A multinomial analysis. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 21(9-10), 755-780.

- Lerman, R. (2002). *Wedding bells ring in stability and economic gains for mothers and children*. Available: <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=900554>
- Mraovick, L., & Wilson, J. (1999). Patterns of child abuse and neglect associated with chronological age of children living in a midwestern county. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 23(9), 899-903.
- Mrazek, P., & Mrazek, D. (1987). Resilience in child maltreatment victims: A conceptual exploration. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 11, 357-366.
- National Research Council. (1993). *Understanding child abuse and neglect*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Schilling, R., & Schinke, S. (1984). Personal coping and social support for parents of handicapped children. *Child and Youth Services Review*, 6, 195-206.
- Schumaker, J. A., Smith Slep, A. M., & Heyman, R. E. (2001). Risk factors for child neglect. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 6, 231-254.
- Sedlak, A., & Broadhurst, D. (1996). *Third National Incidence Study of child abuse and neglect: Final report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Tzeng, O., Jackson, J., & Karlson, H. (1991). *Theories of child abuse and neglect: Differential perspectives, summaries, and evaluations*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1993). *Study of child maltreatment in alcohol abusing families*. Washington, DC: National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect.

The full report on the Emerging Practices project, *Emerging Practices in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, can be found on the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information Web site.

HTML: <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/report/index.cfm>

PDF: <http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/topics/prevention/emerging/report.pdf>

A print copy of the report can be ordered by contacting the Clearinghouse at (800) 394-3366, (703) 385-3206 (fax), nccanch@caliber.com (e-mail).