

# Effects of Child Abuse on the Mental Health of the Child

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**Abstract:** *Child abuse is a serious global problem that has long been studied from different perspectives. The present research is qualitative in nature. It deals with the types and causes of abuse, the impact of abuse on the mental health of children, and its long-term effects in adulthood. It also discusses the management and preventive measures. Child abuse can be in the form of physical, sexual, substance, emotional, psychological, or just neglect in providing for the child's needs. The abuse can be seen more in women than men. Child abuse can directly affect a child's mental health in terms of low confidence, depression, PTSD, and anxiety. The abuser is usually known to the child who can be of any age, gender, caste, culture, and socio-economic status. Abuse may cause serious injury to the child and may even result in death. It has been caused by many reasons like consuming alcohol, family problems, intimate partners, and the parent-child relationship. Some of the Acts came forward to prevent child abuse (POCSO, NCPCR, Juvenile Justice Act, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, and Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act).*

**Keywords:** Abuse, Child Abuse, Mental Health

## 1. Introduction

Everyone feels worried, anxious, or down from time to time, but relatively few people develop a mental illness. A mental illness is a mental health condition that gets in the way of thinking, relating to others, and day-to-day functions. Mental illness can affect anyone. It can affect young and old, male and female, and individuals of every race, ethnic background, education level, and income level equally. Trauma can affect how one feels about oneself and how one relates to others. There are situations, conditions, and factors that predispose a person to develop mental health issues faster than others, as women who have gone through abuse or other traumas have a higher risk of developing a mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Abuse, whether physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual can have long-term effects on mental health.

According to Holmes L. (2023), "Mental health is a term used to describe emotional, psychological, and social well-being."

According to WHO (2015), "Mental health is not mere absence of mental illness, but it is a state of wellbeing in which an individual realizes his/ her own abilities, can cope with normal life stresses, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make a contribution to his/ her community."

The word abuse is thrown around a lot in casual conversations. According to Tracy, N. (2021), "Abuse is defined as any action that intentionally harms or injures another person." Abuse is when one person purposefully hurts another, but that is a very common occurrence in today's life and most of us are guilty of engaging in that from time to time. One person has no right to control another through abuse. Every person has the right to live an abuse-free life. Victims of abuse must know that the abuse is wrong and that they are not at fault if they are abused. Abuse can be physical, psychological, rape, sexual assault,

verbal abuse, elder abuse, financial abuse, spiritual abuse, and emotional abuse but abuse is not restricted to any one of these. Forms of abuse are often common in domestic relationships. Anyone can be an abuser regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, or ethnicity. The abuser is usually known to the child.

WHO (2002) defines child abuse and neglect, or child maltreatment, as including all forms of physical or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, or neglectful action, or commercial or another mistreatment in definite or possible harm to the child's health, continued existence, growth, or self-esteem in the circumstance of a relationship of accountability, trust, or authority. Goldman et. al (2003) viewed child abuse as a very complex and dangerous set of problems that includes child neglect and children's physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Child abuse implicates the situation whereby a parent or guardian causes injuries, death, and emotional damage or provokes a child to severe harm by themselves. It can result in short- and long-term consequences ranging from social problems, emotional problems, cognitive problems, educational problems, low self-esteem, and self-harm. Sometimes, it may lead to suicide. Commonly, there are 4 different types of child abuse that are:

- 1) Physical Abuse: Physical child abuse is an injury resulting from aggression. The damage during the act is also considered physical child abuse. The injury from physical abuse may result in the form of beating, hitting, pushing, kicking, choking, hair pulling, burning with hot objects, or any other severe physical harm.
- 2) Sexual Abuse: Sexual child abuse is any sexual act between an adult and a child. That can be in the form of rape, oral sex, penetration, intercourse, or sodomy. For example, touching or kissing a child's genitals, forcing a child to undress, performing sexual acts in front of a child, exposing genitals, and showing pornography to a child.
- 3) Emotional Abuse: Emotional child abuse is any attitude, behavior, or failure to act that interferes with a child's mental health or social development. It can have long-

lasting negative psychiatric effects on a child's mental health. Emotional abuse can come from parents, teachers, siblings, and bullies at school, or elsewhere.

- 4) Neglect: Neglect is the most common type of child abuse. It is a pattern of failing to provide for a child's basic needs. That can be in the form of physical, educational, or emotional needs. For example, clothing unsuited to the weather, extreme hunger, being dirty, or apparent lack of supervision.

## 2. Online and Direct Abuse

Online abuse is abuse that can happen on the internet through any device that is connected to the internet. It can happen anywhere online, like social media, messaging apps, emails, chats, gaming, and live streaming sites. Children can be at a high risk of abuse from people they know or from strangers. Anyone can experience online abuse, but children and young people are mainly at risk of experiencing it.

Direct abuse is abuse that can occur when an individual experiences harm or neglect in direct interaction with another individual/individuals. It may be in the form of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. Direct abuse is more common with children and women in different forms that can be from family members, friends, or strangers. Globally, the direct experience of being subjected to domestic violence is greater among women than among men (Feder D and Potter L., 2017).

## 3. Prevalence

Findings of a recent study conducted in India reveal that up to 53% of the children reported being abused sexually with one or other form of child sexual abuse (Singh, 2014). The prevalence estimates of child sexual abuse (CSA) worldwide between 2002 and 2009 ranged from 31 % for girls and 3 to 17 % for boys. Nine girls and three boys out of 100 are victims of forced intercourse (Barth J, 2013).

International studies reveal that 20% of women and 5–10% of men report being sexually abused as children, while 25–50% of all children report being physically abused. Additionally, many children are subject to emotional abuse and neglect: every year, an estimated 41000 homicide deaths in children below 15 years of age (WHO, 2014).

## 4. Causes

It occurs when a family lacks the means to meet the needs of its members, particularly their children, for things like food, appropriate clothing, education, etc. the possibility of abuse increases. According to Chandra D. (2017), some parents abuse their children after consuming alcohol or other substances which is also a factor that affects child abuse. Moreover, relationship difficulties within families or among intimate partners, friends, and peers may increase the risk of child maltreatment. In addition, social and cultural norms that promote or glorify violence towards others, support the use of corporal punishment, demand rigid gender roles, or diminish the child's status in parent-child relationships.

Adults who experienced abuse as a child may be more likely to show abusive behaviors toward their own children or any other person which is also one of the causes of child abuse. Work pressures of parents can also be the cause of child abuse. Children who have mental illnesses, disabilities, or behavioral problems are more prone to get abused. Parents find it difficult to deal with the emotional needs of a child especially when they face stressful situations. Divorces, relationship issues, financial worries, and job-related problems can lead to parents contracting out abuse to their children (Chitnis R., 2018).

The lack of legislation and policy implementation is another reason for child abuse. There is a gap between law and implementation. This is the reason why criminals get the full chance to gather the courage to commit such heinous crimes. Illiteracy is another reason why most people abuse children. Child labor, child marriage, son preference, caste-based discrimination, and consequent neglect of the girl child, are harmful traditional practices and are responsible for child abuse in society (Dahiya S., 2021).

## 5. Effect of Abuse

According to Qianwen Li, Fugang Wang, and Jinhui Ye. (2021), various factors causing psychological abuse in children and behavioral malpractices are attributed to a lack of social awareness of the prevention and early detection of psychological abuse in childhood.

Children who experience abuse or neglect in their childhood fail to develop proper emotional and psychological health. This leads to the development of psychological disorders such as depression, emotional instability, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and a tendency to be aggressive or violent with others. Child abuse causes traumatic stress, which disrupts homeostasis, causing immediate and long-term endocrine changes in metabolism and neurophysiology (Wilfred O., 2020; Stirling J. J. et al., 2008; Dahake P. T., Kale Y. J., and Dadpe M. V., 2018; Thomas R., 2015).

According to Cohen P, Brown J, and Smaile E., (2001) disorder and symptom patterns differed both by group and by age: neglect cases showed partial remission in adulthood, while official physical abuse cases showed an increasingly consolidated pattern of antisocial and impulsive behavior.

The severity of parental psychological abuse significantly predicted poor mental health (Damodaran D. K., Rapheal J., and Paul V., 2014). Abused and neglected women report more symptoms of dysthymia, antisocial personality disorder, and alcohol problems than those who were not abused and neglected (Horwitz A. V. et al., 2001). A history of physical abuse might particularly be a key determinant of cognitive performance in older adults with depression, anxiety, or somatic symptoms disorder (Tjoelker F. M., Jeurig H. W., and Oude R. C., 2022).

According to Odhayani A. A., Watson W. J., and Watson L., (2013) the consequences of abuse on childhood behavior development, highlight some behavior clues that might alert physical to ongoing child abuse and explore the specific role of the family physician in clinical situations. Child abuse

might cause disordered psychological development and behavior problems. Family physicians have an important role in recognizing clues that suggest child abuse and in providing help to protect children.

## 6. Acts

With the intent to effectively address the evil of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) was passed by the parliament in the year 2012. Its aim is to protect children from offenses of sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography and provide for the establishment of Special Courts for the trial of such offenses and matters connected in addition to that or incidental thereto.

The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), 2005 emphasizes the principle of universality and inviolability of child rights and recognizes the tone of urgency in all the child-related policies of the country. For the Commission, the protection of all children in the 0 to 18 years age group is of equal importance. Thus, policies define priority actions for the most vulnerable children. This includes a focus on regions that are backward or on communities or children under certain circumstances, and so on (NCPCR, 2022).

The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection Of Children) Act, 2000 (JJ Act) has been enacted to amend and consolidate the law relating to children or juveniles in conflict with the law and those children in need of proper care and protection by adopting an approach that is child-friendly in the adjudication of disposition of matters in the best interest of children. Juvenile crimes extended to serious crimes like murder and rape. Hence, the Parliament came up with a bill in 2014 that ultimately became law in 2015 (Abimanyu G., 2020).

India has a fairly comprehensive policy against abuse. It has taken legal action to address rights and protection for children, providing opportunities to ensure that all children have equal access to quality protection services. The core child protection legislation for children is enshrined in four main laws: The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act (2000, amended in 2015); The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006); The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (2012), and The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (1986, amended in 2016).

## 7. Prevention and Management

Kemoli A. M. and Mavindu M. (2014) suggested trauma effects management along with counseling services to deal with child abuse followed by social support through their study on a 12-year-old orphan boy.

Johnson E. J. (2016) identified a resilience approach that examines and guides the review of the risk, protective factors, and resilience in the abused person's life. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) was also found helpful for him to identify the disorder.

Klein and Goldston (1977) say that primary prevention can play an important role in helping children to understand

child abuse. According to them some of the Primary preventive measures are:

- **Responsibility of the Family:** Family being the first educational institution for the child, parents or primary caregiver plays an important role in the life of children. It is the responsibility of parents to educate their children about the various forms of abuse and also to be watchful in not practicing any of these.
- **Responsibility of the Schools:** The responsibility of the schools cannot be ignored. School-based prevention programs must include child abuse. As in the Indian context, urge the school authorities to act "decisively, quickly, and systematically" when faced with a complaint of child sexual abuse. POCSO Act summarizes the roles and responsibilities of School Authorities in preventing child sexual abuse.
- **Promotion of NGOs:** NGOs, like Save the Children, have dedicated services fighting child sex abuse and providing rehab to victims of abuse. It conducts pan-India programs engaging parents, teachers, communities, and even children about sexual abuse. Adolescents are involved in elaborate projects on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH).
- **Role of the Government:** The ultimate responsibility to protect its nation's children lies with the Government. The Government should commit appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to prevent and protect children from maltreatment.
- **Role of the Community:** Wherever the parents are unable to take care of and protect the child, the proximate community and their elected representatives must take up that responsibility. Thus, in the village, panchayat officials (local self-government) and in the urban areas, the elected members must ensure that every child is in school, receives basic health care (particularly immunizations, and nutrition), and protection from child abuse & neglect (Srivastava R.N., 2008).

## 8. Conclusion and Suggestion

Child abuse has been an issue that can affect both genders and it comes in many forms; physical, mental, emotional, and sexual. Abuse or violence can take place in all settings: at home, school, childcare institutions, work, and in the community. Often abuse or violence is perpetrated by someone known to the child and it can be done by anyone regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, education, or ethnicity. Child abuse can affect the child's life, especially when they're growing older. As the abuse continues, it could lead to broken or fractured bones within the victim's body leading to a disability in the future. It could lead to depression, anxiety, and an extreme lack of motivation to do anything. If this gets serious enough, the child may experience suicide or death.

There are some Acts that come forward to prevent child abuse that is: The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO), the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection Of Children) Act, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act. The importance of roles and responsibilities of families, educational setups,



community, NGOs, and government cannot be denied in preventing and dealing with child abuse.

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## Author Profile



**Diksha Bhayana** completed her Graduation in Psychology from Graphic Era University in 2020 and Post Graduation Degree in Psychology from Chandigarh University in 2022 and completed Post Graduate Diploma in Guidance and Counseling from Guru Ram Rai University in 2023. Having one year of internship experience in the field of Counseling and Assessments in different NGOs and clinics.