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[www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/sp\\_long\\_term\\_consequences.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/sp_long_term_consequences.cfm)

## Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect



An estimated 905,000 children were victims of child abuse or neglect in 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). While physical injuries may or may not be immediately visible, abuse and neglect can have consequences for children, families, and society that last lifetimes, if not generations.

The impact of child abuse and neglect is often discussed in terms of physical, psychological,

### What's Inside:

- Factors affecting the consequences of child abuse and neglect
- Physical health consequences
- Psychological consequences
- Behavioral consequences
- Societal consequences



behavioral, and societal consequences. In reality, however, it is impossible to separate them completely. Physical consequences, such as damage to a child's growing brain, can have psychological implications such as cognitive delays or emotional difficulties. Psychological problems often manifest as high-risk behaviors. Depression and anxiety, for example, may make a person more likely to smoke, abuse alcohol or illicit drugs, or overeat. High-risk behaviors, in turn, can lead to long-term physical health problems such as sexually transmitted diseases, cancer, and obesity.

This factsheet provides an overview of some of the most common physical, psychological, behavioral, and societal consequences of child abuse and neglect, while acknowledging that much crossover among categories exists.

## Factors Affecting the Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect

Not all abused and neglected children will experience long-term consequences.

The Federal Government has made a considerable investment in research regarding the causes and long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect. These efforts are ongoing; for more information, visit the websites listed below:

**LONGSCAN** (Longitudinal Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect) is a consortium of longitudinal research studies on the causes and impact of child abuse and neglect, initiated in 1990 with grants from the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. The size and diversity of the sample (1,354 children from five distinct geographical areas) enables LONGSCAN to examine the relative impact of various forms of maltreatment, alone and in combination. LONGSCAN studies also evaluate the effectiveness of child protection and child welfare services.

[www.iprc.unc.edu/longscan](http://www.iprc.unc.edu/longscan)

**NSCAW** (The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being) is a project of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families to describe the child welfare system and the experiences of children and families who come in contact with the system. Its 2005 report provides a snapshot of the functioning and the potential service needs of children and families soon after a child protective services investigation has taken place. NSCAW will continue to follow the life course of these children to gather data about services received during subsequent periods, measures of child well-being, and longer-term results for the study population. This information will provide a clearer understanding of life outcomes for children and families who come into contact with the child welfare system.

[www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse\\_neglect/nscaw/index.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/abuse_neglect/nscaw/index.html)

Outcomes of individual cases vary widely and are affected by a combination of factors, including:

- The child's age and developmental status when the abuse or neglect occurred
- The type of abuse (physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, etc.)
- The frequency, duration, and severity of abuse
- The relationship between the victim and his or her abuser (English et al., 2005; Chalk, Gibbons, & Scarupa, 2002)

Researchers also have begun to explore why, given similar conditions, some children experience long-term consequences of abuse and neglect while others emerge relatively unscathed. The ability to cope, and even thrive, following a negative experience is sometimes referred to as "resilience." A number of protective and promotive factors may contribute to an abused or neglected child's resilience. These include individual characteristics, such as optimism, self-esteem, intelligence, creativity, humor, and independence, as well as the acceptance of peers and positive individual influences such as teachers, mentors, and role models. Other factors can include the child's social environment and the family's access to social supports. Community well-being, including neighborhood stability and access to safe schools and adequate health care, are other protective and promotive factors (Fraser & Terzian, 2005).

## Physical Health Consequences

The immediate physical effects of abuse or neglect can be relatively minor (bruises or cuts) or severe (broken bones, hemorrhage, or even death). In some cases the physical effects are temporary; however, the pain and suffering they cause a child should not be discounted. Meanwhile, the long-term impact of child abuse and neglect on physical health is just beginning to be explored. According to the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), more than one-quarter of children who had been in foster care for longer than 12 months had some lasting or recurring health problem (Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation [ACF/OPRE], 2004a). Below are some outcomes researchers have identified:

**Shaken baby syndrome.** Shaking a baby is a common form of child abuse. The injuries caused by shaking a baby may not be immediately noticeable and may include bleeding in the eye or brain, damage to the spinal cord and neck, and rib or bone fractures (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2007).

**Impaired brain development.** Child abuse and neglect have been shown, in some cases, to cause important regions of the brain to fail to form or grow properly, resulting in impaired development (De Bellis & Thomas, 2003). These alterations in brain maturation have long-term consequences for cognitive, language, and academic abilities (Watts-English, Fortson,

Gibler, Hooper, & De Bellis, 2006). NSCAW found more than three-quarters of foster children between 1 and 2 years of age to be at medium to high risk for problems with brain development, as opposed to less than half of children in a control sample (ACF/OPRE, 2004a).

**Poor physical health.** Several studies have shown a relationship between various forms of household dysfunction (including childhood abuse) and poor health (Flaherty et al., 2006; Felitti, 2002). Adults who experienced abuse or neglect during childhood are more likely to suffer from physical ailments such as allergies, arthritis, asthma, bronchitis, high blood pressure, and ulcers (Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007).

## Psychological Consequences

The immediate emotional effects of abuse and neglect— isolation, fear, and an inability to trust— can translate into lifelong consequences, including low self-esteem, depression, and relationship difficulties. Researchers have identified links between child abuse and neglect and the following:

**Difficulties during infancy.** Depression and withdrawal symptoms were common among children as young as 3 who experienced emotional, physical, or environmental neglect (Dubowitz, Papas, Black, & Starr, 2002).

**Poor mental and emotional health.** In one long-term study, as many as 80 percent of young adults who had been abused

met the diagnostic criteria for at least one psychiatric disorder at age 21. These young adults exhibited many problems, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and suicide attempts (Silverman, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1996). Other psychological and emotional conditions associated with abuse and neglect include panic disorder, dissociative disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression, anger, posttraumatic stress disorder, and reactive attachment disorder (Teicher, 2000; De Bellis & Thomas, 2003; Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007).

**Cognitive difficulties.** NSCAW found that children placed in out-of-home care due to abuse or neglect tended to score lower than the general population on measures of cognitive capacity, language development, and academic achievement (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). A 1999 LONGSCAN study also found a relationship between substantiated child maltreatment and poor academic performance and classroom functioning for school-age children (Zolotor, Kotch, Dufort, Winsor, & Catellier, 1999).

**Social difficulties.** Children who experience rejection or neglect are more likely to develop antisocial traits as they grow up. Parental neglect is also associated with borderline personality disorders and violent behavior (Schore, 2003).

## Behavioral Consequences

Not all victims of child abuse and neglect will experience behavioral consequences. However, behavioral problems appear to be more likely among this group, even at a young age. An NSCAW survey of children ages 3 to 5 in foster care found these children displayed clinical or borderline levels of behavioral problems at a rate more than twice that of the general population (ACF, 2004b). Later in life, child abuse and neglect appear to make the following more likely:

**Difficulties during adolescence.** Studies have found abused and neglected children to be at least 25 percent more likely to experience problems such as delinquency, teen pregnancy, low academic achievement, drug use, and mental health problems (Kelley, Thornberry, & Smith, 1997). Other studies suggest that abused or neglected children are more likely to engage in sexual risk-taking as they reach adolescence, thereby increasing their chances of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (Johnson, Rew, & Sternglanz, 2006).

**Juvenile delinquency and adult criminality.** According to a National Institute of Justice study, abused and neglected children were 11 times more likely to be arrested for criminal behavior as a juvenile, 2.7 times more likely to be arrested for violent and criminal behavior as an adult, and 3.1 times more likely to be arrested for one of many forms of violent crime (juvenile or adult) (English, Widom, & Brandford, 2004).

**Alcohol and other drug abuse.** Research consistently reflects an increased likelihood that abused and neglected children will smoke cigarettes, abuse alcohol, or take illicit drugs during their lifetime (Dube et al., 2001). According to a report from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, as many as two-thirds of people in drug treatment programs reported being abused as children (Swan, 1998).

**Abusive behavior.** Abusive parents often have experienced abuse during their own childhoods. It is estimated approximately one-third of abused and neglected children will eventually victimize their own children (Prevent Child Abuse New York, 2003).

## Societal Consequences

While child abuse and neglect almost always occur within the family, the impact does not end there. Society as a whole pays a price for child abuse and neglect, in terms of both direct and indirect costs.

**Direct costs.** Direct costs include those associated with maintaining a child welfare system to investigate and respond to allegations of child abuse and neglect, as well as expenditures by the judicial, law enforcement, health, and mental health systems. A 2001 report by Prevent Child Abuse America estimates these costs at \$24 billion per year.

**Indirect costs.** Indirect costs represent the long-term economic consequences of child abuse and neglect. These include costs associated with juvenile and adult criminal activity, mental illness, substance abuse, and

domestic violence. They can also include loss of productivity due to unemployment and underemployment, the cost of special education services, and increased use of the health care system. Prevent Child Abuse America estimated these costs at more than \$69 billion per year (2001).

## Summary

Much research has been done about the possible consequences of child abuse and neglect. The effects vary depending on the circumstances of the abuse or neglect, personal characteristics of the child, and the child's environment. Consequences may be mild or severe; disappear after a short period or last a lifetime; and affect the child physically, psychologically, behaviorally, or in some combination of all three ways.

Ultimately, due to related costs to public entities such as the health care, human services, and educational systems, abuse and neglect impact not just the child and family, but society as a whole.

## RESOURCES ON THE CHILD WELFARE INFORMATION GATEWAY WEBSITE

### Child Abuse and Neglect

[www.childwelfare.gov/can/index.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/index.cfm)

### Defining Child Abuse and Neglect

[www.childwelfare.gov/can/defining/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/can/defining/)

### Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect

[www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/](http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/)

### Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

[www.childwelfare.gov/responding/reporting.cfm](http://www.childwelfare.gov/responding/reporting.cfm)

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