Risk and Protective Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect

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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 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. Perhaps the least understood and studied level of child maltreatment is that of societal factors. Ecological theories 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).

Protective Factors

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 including those with two-parent households, 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
Risk and Protective Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect

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 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


HTML: www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/programs/whatworks/report


A print copy of the report can be ordered by contacting Information Gateway at 800.394.3366, 703.385.3206 (fax), info@childwelfare.gov (email).