



# Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

A BULLETIN FOR  
PROFESSIONALS

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## Risk and Protective Factors for Child Abuse and Neglect

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



**Child Welfare Information Gateway**  
Children's Bureau/ACYF  
1250 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Eighth Floor  
Washington, DC 20024  
703.385.7565 or 800.394.3366  
Email: [info@childwelfare.gov](mailto:info@childwelfare.gov)  
[www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)

## 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 (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

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.

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The full report on the *Emerging Practices project, Emerging Practices in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, can be found on the Child Welfare Information Gateway website.

HTML: [www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/programs/whatworks/report](http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/programs/whatworks/report)

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