

Child Abuse – Back To Basics:

Understanding Child Abuse.

Understanding the nature and cause of child abuse has challenged our society for generations. If there is one fact we have learned during this time, **is that there is no single cause of child abuse.** In addition, child abuse can occur across all socioeconomic, religious and ethnic groups. There are a variety of manifestations and causes of child abuse. We will consider some of the factors thought to be associated with child abuse by categorizing them according to factors related to parents, children, families and the environment.

Parent Factors.

The most consistent finding in child abuse literature is that abusive parents often report having been physically, sexually or emotionally abused as children. **Children essentially will parent as they were parented. Children live what they learn.**

HOWEVER, there are parents who have not been abused as children who become abusive, as well as parents who have been abused as children and **do not** abuse their own children.

A parents overall history as a child plays a large part in how prepared he/she may be to be a parent. Parents who have not had their own developmental needs met may find it very difficult to meet the needs of their children.

Although many abusive parents experience behavioral and emotional difficulties, mental illness plays a very small overall role in child abuse. Characteristics identified in some abusive parents include: low self-esteem, low intelligence, ego deficiency, hostility, isolation, loneliness, anxiety, depression, apathy, fear of rejection, narcissism, immaturity, dependency, distrust, drug or alcohol abuse. In particular, **substance and alcohol abuse has become an increasing problem.** The devastating nature of drugs is far reaching.

The CPU (Child Protection Unit) reports that drug use, combined with the parents history of abuse as children, is resulting in caseloads comprised of seriously dysfunctional families.

Alcohol abuse is becoming (statistically) a major contributor to the alarming incidents of child and baby rape.

A variety of problems resulting from the lack of skills and knowledge have also been suggested as characteristics of some abusive parents. These include lack of parenting skills, problems with coping, self-control, marital difficulties and a general lack of interpersonal skills.

Parents lack of knowledge of childhood development may result in inappropriate expectations. Inappropriate attitudes can contribute to abusive behavior, for example, acceptance of violence as a way to solve problems.

These attitudes can also result in punishment when parents expect behaviors that the child is not developmentally capable of, for example, spanking a 1-year-old for soiling his/her pants.

Specific situations, such as unwanted pregnancy, physical illness and the poor ability to empathize with their children can substantially increase the likelihood of abuse, particularly when social stress and social isolation characterize the family.

Child Factors.

Certain children are more physically and emotionally vulnerable to abusive behavior. The child's age and physical, mental, emotional and social development can greatly increase or decrease the likelihood of abuse, depending on the interactions with parental factors previously discussed.

Younger children, due to their physical size and development status, are particularly vulnerable to certain forms of abuse, such as the "battered child syndrome", the "shaken infant syndrome" and the "failure to thrive syndrome".

The child's behavior, for example, unpleasant crying and unresponsiveness, can increase the likelihood of abuse, particularly if a parent has a poor ability to empathize with the child and a difficulty controlling his/her emotions.

In general, children who are perceived to be "different", such as disabled children, are at greater risk of abuse.

Children who are socially isolated are often also felt to be at high risk. For example, a child who does not have a close relationship with his/her mother and has few or no friends may be more susceptible to offers of attention and affection in exchange for sex.

Family Factors.

Specific life situations of some families can increase the likelihood of abuse, such as marital conflicts, domestic violence, unemployment, financial stress, "space", and social isolation.

HOWEVER, these factors in themselves may not cause abuse.

Families involved in child abuse tend to exhibit a pattern of day-to-day interaction characterized by a low level of social exchange, low responsiveness to positive behavior and high responsiveness to negative behavior. Other research suggests that abusive parents display fewer appropriate care-giving behaviors than non-abusive parents, and they tend to use ineffective and inconsistent punishment and discipline.

Environmental Factors.

Environmental factors are often found in combination with child, parent and family factors that have been highlighted previously in this article.

The incidence of child abuse is higher in some cultures, societies and communities than others. And what one culture defines as child abuse may be a socially acceptable interaction in other cultures. Economic pressure, values concerning the role of the child in the family, attitudes about the use of physical punishment, and the degree of social support for parents seem to account for these differences.

Stress caused by poverty is associated with higher rates of reported child abuse, as evidenced at times of increased unemployment and economic recessions.

Isolation within the family, abusive families are often isolated from their neighbors and the community. As a result, abusive families tend to participate less in community activities and make less use of available economic, health and social resources.

Report abuse – it's the right thing to do!

**Wo+men Against Child Abuse – Fighting For Their Rights.
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