

# Effects of Abuse on Children

Abuse affects boys and girls in different ways. Girls are less likely to show the effects in external behavior, but instead will have problems of low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, somatic complaints, mood swings, and lower levels of social skills. Boys suffer both internalizing problems and externalizing problems (such as hitting, cruelty to others, truancy, lying, stealing, skipping school, destroying things, and associating with bad friends who get into similar trouble) as well as lower levels of social skills.<sup>1)</sup>

## 1. Witnessing the Physical Abuse of Parents

Witnessing conflict between parents, even married parents, [hurts the child](#). The more frequent or intense the conflict, the more the child is hurt emotionally, and the more likely he or she is to become delinquent as an adolescent and violent as an adult.<sup>2)</sup> In fact, children who witness abuse are more likely to abuse spouses and children when they are adults than are children who suffer abuse themselves.<sup>3)</sup> One study indicates that children who saw their mother being abused, compared with those who did not, are 24 times more likely to commit sexual assault crimes, 50 times more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, 74 times more likely to commit crimes against another person, and 6 times more likely to commit suicide.<sup>4)</sup> These children are also more susceptible to anxiety and depression.<sup>5)</sup>

Witnessing such abuse affects not only future behavior, but also present physical and mental health. Children with their mothers in shelters for battered women show a high incidence of health problems among infants and mood-related disorders among preschoolers. Boys have more behavioral “acting-out” problems, and girls tend to have more “emotional” problems (that is, they are more withdrawn and need to stay close to mother). Sometimes these young children are even suicidal.<sup>6)</sup>

## 2. Physical Abuse by Mothers

The person most likely to abuse a young child is the [child's own mother](#).<sup>7)</sup> Although physical acts of violence by the mother may seem very destructive psychologically, they become most destructive when the mother is not emotionally attached to her child.<sup>8)</sup> This lack of attachment can result in life-long damage to the child's emotional life and capacity for developing social relations, weakening future relationships with peers, spouse, and offspring.<sup>9)</sup>

Physical abuse harms the child's emotional and intellectual growth, leads to poor performance in academic areas,<sup>10)</sup> frequently distorts the child's self-image and view of the world,<sup>11)</sup> and leads to depression and a weakened ability to regulate emotions. As a consequence, abused children tend to have decreased quality of adult relationships<sup>12)</sup> and to adopt distorted beliefs about social relations between people,<sup>13)</sup> such as the belief that all men are abusers or that the marriage relationship must be exploitative. Abused children tend to know they are different, and knowingly behave in ways likely to get them in trouble with others; they know they are unwanted, and even that they are less healthy physically than their peers.<sup>14)</sup>

### 3. Likelihood That Abused Children Will Become Abusing Adults

The evidence is aptly summarized by SUNY Professor of Psychology Cathy Spatz Widom: "Violence begets violence."<sup>15)</sup> Witnessing or experiencing [abuse and violence](#) increases the likelihood that a child will become a violent adult.<sup>16)</sup> Children react to quarreling parents by disobeying, crying, hitting other children, and, in general, becoming much more antisocial than their peers.<sup>17)</sup> Additionally, maltreatment persisting into adolescence, as opposed to maltreatment limited to childhood, increases the likelihood of intergenerational continuity of abuse.<sup>18)</sup>

The world does not respond favorably to antisocial behavior, which is linked to child abuse, even in the little world of kindergarten. Ronald Simons, Professor of Sociology at Iowa State University, notes that "Ineffective parents produce aggressive first graders who are rejected by their peers and as a consequence must form friendships with other deviant youth."<sup>19)</sup> Likewise, Gerald Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Center writes that "Poor social skills, characterized by aversive or coercive interaction styles, lead directly to rejection by normal peers."<sup>20)</sup> Patterson, a leading expert on parenting skills, also makes the point that peer rejection tends to be linked to "ineffective parenting": "Specifically, early parent failures contribute to later skills deficits. Parent skills in solving family problems correlate significantly with measures of academic skill and peer relations."<sup>21)</sup> The isolated mother in a very [poor neighborhood](#) has little opportunity to encounter and absorb effective skills.

Even men in college who witnessed or experienced domestic violence at an early age often begin demonstrating violent tendencies during courtship.<sup>22)</sup> Not all children who grow up witnessing abuse between their parents or experiencing abuse themselves go on to become abusers; however, approximately one-third of them do.<sup>23)</sup>

### 4. Effects of the Duration and Intensity of Child Abuse

Research shows that the longer the child experiences abuse, the more likely he or she is to become an adult abuser,<sup>24)</sup> and the more varied the forms of abuse, the deeper the effect will be.<sup>25)</sup>

In addition, intense but unpredictable episodes can cause a massive increase in fear and anxiety.<sup>26)</sup> The more these episodes occur, the more likely the child is to see hitting back as a form of reciprocal justice in the give and take of human relationships.<sup>27)</sup> Furthermore, the younger the child is when the abuse starts, the deeper the effects. Severe abuse that began before a child was 46 months old was more likely to induce Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD),<sup>28)</sup> while abuse that started after the child was 61 months old was not likely to induce PTSD. Understandably, children who were less than 46 months old also were more likely to have mothers who exhibited symptoms of PTSD from their own past experience of abuse.<sup>29)</sup>

There are, it should be noted, circumstances that lessen the impact of abuse. If the consequences of abuse are small, or if the child does not like the aggressive parent or cohabiting adult, then there is less likelihood that a child will become an abuser as an adult.<sup>30)</sup>

## 5. Effects of Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse, from unwanted kissing and fondling to sexual intercourse, has numerous—and possibly some of the most debilitating—social effects on a child. Most sexual abuse takes place within the family setting, and most child sexual abuse is done by men, not women.<sup>31)</sup> Men who sexually abuse children frequently have histories of impoverished early infant emotional attachment to their mothers, desertion by fathers, family dissolution, and early departure from home. These deficits have increased significantly in recent decades and lead to severe emotional dependence on others later in life.<sup>32)</sup>

Sexual abuse is more difficult to detect than other types of abuse as 90 percent of victims do not exhibit physical damage.<sup>33)</sup> The social isolation of many at-risk families increases the likelihood of psychosexual distortions because the child has fewer opportunities to experience the good influence of other adults or the friendship of other children.<sup>34)</sup> This isolation also makes it easier for adults to hide even massive abuse.

Particularly serious or prolonged abuse leads to higher rates of [crime and delinquency](#).<sup>35)</sup> The FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime has noted that the three factors most frequently present in the development of a killer are (1) trauma in the form of physical or sexual abuse; (2) failure of the child to attach readily to his mother; and (3) failure of the parents to serve as role models for the developing child.<sup>36)</sup> In an abusing family, the likelihood that all three factors are operating is greater. Child sexual abuse also can play a major role in shaping the future sex criminal. The National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime has confirmed the association between early sexual abuse and later psychosexual disorders.<sup>37)</sup>

As in physical abuse, the more frequent and severe the sexual abuse and the longer its duration, the more depressed and self-destructive the abused child becomes as an adult.<sup>38)</sup> This holds true for both boys and girls. Among children who had been sexually abused, over 28 percent experienced PTSD later in life. Therefore, sexual abuse increases a child's likelihood for PTSD by four to five times the prevalence rate.<sup>39)</sup> Furthermore, sexually abused children often struggle with reconciling their past experiences with the concepts of the love of God and God's plan for their lives.<sup>40)</sup>

Compared with non-abused children, those who experienced sexual abuse often show more signs of poor self-esteem, poor peer relationships, depression, and body image disturbances.<sup>41)</sup> They are more likely to use drugs and be delinquent, have poor relationships with the rest of their families, feel they have received less emotional support from families and friends, and perform more poorly at school; they also tend to move between domiciles more frequently, thus adding to their levels of anxiety and stress.<sup>42)</sup> The more severe the abuse, the higher the levels of avoidant coping, self-blame and family-blame.<sup>43)</sup>

Sexual abuse distorts the child's inner psychosexual dynamics, and its effects become more apparent in adolescence and adulthood, particularly if the abuse is forced or violent.<sup>44)</sup> Unlike other maltreated children, sexually abused children are much more likely to display behaviors indicative of deviant or precocious sexual development,<sup>45)</sup> including severe difficulty in establishing and maintaining close friendships<sup>46)</sup> and engaging in high-risk sexual behavior.<sup>47)</sup> These behaviors may persist in some form into adulthood,<sup>48)</sup> especially in the form of sexual revictimization: one-third of male and one-half of female perpetrators of sexual abuse report having been sexually abused themselves.<sup>49)</sup> Women who have had more than ten sexual partners (which also puts them at high risk for a number of serious medical problems) are more than three times as likely to have had sexual experiences forced upon them as children.<sup>50)</sup> In addition, boys who are victims of incest are inclined to engage in sexually

abusive behavior as fathers.<sup>51)</sup>

Sexual abuse frequently leads to truancy and running away from home. A study examining 372 homeless and runaway adolescents found that over half of them had been physically abused and almost a third had been sexually abused.<sup>52)</sup> Although teenage prostitution often is preceded by a child's running away from home, it has deeper roots in early sexual abuse in the home.<sup>53)</sup>

In light of all this evidence, the increase in the incidence of sexual abuse documented in the NIS-1, NIS-2, NIS-3 and NIS-4 studies augurs poorly for the country.

## 6. Effects of Child Abuse on Teenagers

As demonstrated in numerous studies, a broken and abusing family is the principal factor in the emergence of the violent criminal. For every 10 percent increase in [out-of-wedlock births](#), serious violent crime increases 17 percent.<sup>54)</sup> The families of incarcerated teenagers across the world seem to share similar debilitating characteristics: the presence of physical abuse, heightened conflicts, alcohol abuse, and absent or broken marriages.<sup>55)</sup>

A young individual's growth in violent behavior could be characterized as part of the [violent family cycle](#): Youths who abuse their parents tend to come from families in which violence, disruption, and discord are everyday occurrences. They learn early that force achieves results. These same teenagers tend to have a low tolerance for frustration and few skills with which to cope with different people in different situations. They are immature, are not very verbal, and find it difficult to understand cause-and-effect relationships. From their earliest years, they have found their parents to be, intermittently, both punitive and lax, using force and violence to control them while at the same time lacking standards themselves. By their teenage years, these children have learned to react to their parents with a similar display of violence and force.<sup>56)</sup>

Teens from abusive families will fight or flee. They become involved in crime, especially violent crime. Almost half of violent teenage crimes occur in homes during family arguments.<sup>57)</sup> These young people frequently become involved in gangs or run away from home, and then become homeless or involved in prostitution. Three-quarters of homeless youths seeking services in shelters have problems, from moderate to severe, that stem from physical and sexual abuse, violence in the family, drug and alcohol abuse by parents, depression, and school problems.<sup>58)</sup>

It is important to consider that parents who abuse their children from early childhood through the teenage years probably were abused as children themselves. Parents who begin to be violent with their children when the latter reach their teenage years tend not to have been abused as children.<sup>59)</sup>

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This entry draws heavily from [The Child Abuse Crisis: The Disintegration of Marriage, Family, and the American Community](#).

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