



The Etiology, Identification and Effects of Childhood Abuse

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Introduction

What are the different types of child abuse?

Physical

Any form of intentional physical harm to a child. Includes hitting, choking, kicking, burning, and “any action that results in a physical impairment of the child”.¹

Emotional

Often described as “injury to the psychological capacity or emotional stability of the child as evidenced by an observable or substantial change in behavior, emotional response, or cognition”.¹

Sexual

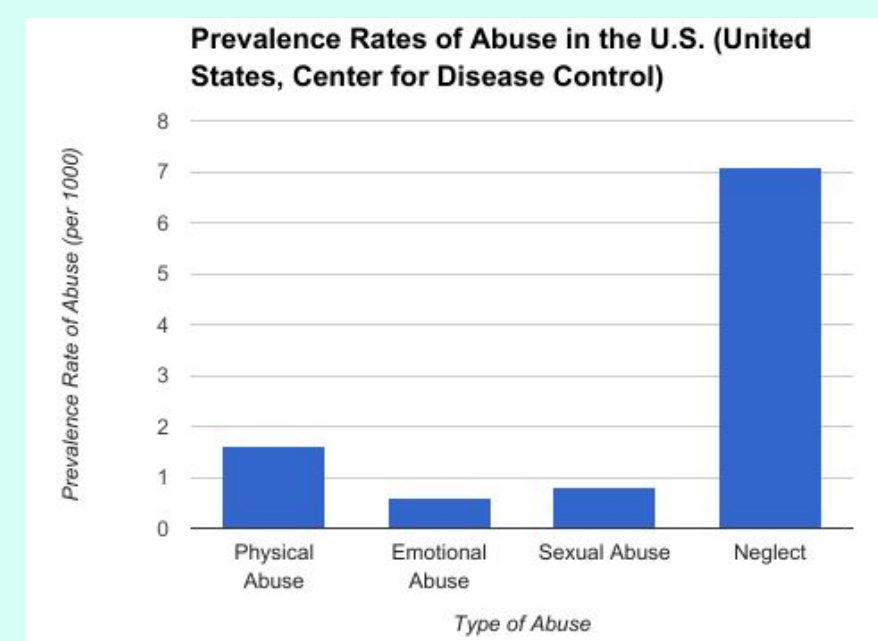
The coercion or forcing of a child to engage in sexually explicit conduct, such as “statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children”.¹

Neglect

Failure of a parent to care for a child’s basic needs, such as “food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm”.¹

Background & Significance

Although it is easy to assume that child abuse is generally physical, the reality is that there are actually many different subclasses of abuse. We were interested to see if different forms of abuse could affect people in different ways, and we were particularly interested in forms of abuse that don’t receive as much attention from society or research.



So what is emotional abuse?

Although we found lots of information and statistics regarding physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect during our preliminary research, we found very little on the subject of emotional abuse (also called psychological abuse and emotional maltreatment). As we dug further, we realized that, unlike other forms of abuse, there didn’t seem to be a clear consensus on what emotional abuse is. Through our research, we hoped to find a more precise definition of emotional abuse by compiling information from various scientific journals.

Methodology

Literature Review

- Searched for articles on school databases and received articles from our mentor
- Used JSTOR and OneSearch Discovery
- Keywords included ‘child abuse,’ ‘parent-child relationships,’ ‘physical abuse,’ ‘emotional abuse,’ ‘emotional maltreatment,’ ‘sexual abuse,’ ‘physical neglect,’ and ‘emotional neglect.’

Survey

- Defining emotional abuse by using example scenarios
- Asked participants whether they viewed the parent’s behavior in the scenario as good parenting, bad parenting, neither good or bad parenting, physically abusive parenting, emotionally abusive parenting, sexually abusive parenting or neglectful parenting.

Results

Physical

Physical abuse is the most widely-known form of abuse, as its effects are the easiest to see. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children’s Bureau, 17.2% of child abuse victims were physically abused, although estimates of child abuse are known to be under-reported. A history of physical abuse can also increase one’s likelihood of intimate partner violence.⁴

Sexual

With children, any form of sexual acts, including noncontact abuse, sexual molestation, and rape, is considered abuse. The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglects estimated that approximately 135,300 children are reported to be sexually abused every year, but the actual numbers may be significantly higher, as the majority of these cases are not reported. Childhood sexual abuse has been linked to higher chances of substance abuse and risky sexual behavior as an adolescent.⁵

Neglect

Like emotional abuse, neglect is often overlooked especially among adolescents, as there is a gray area between neglectful parenting and allowing a child to be independent. However, it also happens to be the predominant form of abuse in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. Neglected children are more likely to exhibit internalising behaviors such as depression, anxiety, or anger.⁶

Emotional

Although other forms of abuse are reported and documented much more often, emotional abuse is considered more common and more damaging than other types of abuse, due to the fact that it is often very hard to identify and victims may blame themselves for their treatment.⁷ Many survivors do not even realize that the treatment they are experiencing is abusive. This type of abuse often creates a role reversal between the parent and the child, and as a result many emotionally abused children do not develop healthy boundaries between themselves and others. Emotional abuse can also lead to development issues, such as poor growth in height, weight, or head size. The child may also develop an “abnormal sense of self-importance” which is not arrogance, but rather a belief that they negatively affect everything around them.⁸

Behavior:

Parents exhibit role reversal (expecting the children to care for the parents).⁸

Parents constantly blame children for things the children have no control over.⁸

Parents deny or invalidate the children’s perceptions.⁸

Parents label one child as “good” and the other as “bad” and abuse the “bad” one.⁸

Effect:

Children do not develop healthy boundaries as adults and become hypersensitive to the needs of their parents.⁸

Children may develop a belief that they negatively affect everything around them.⁸

Children may withdraw into a fantasy world often to escape the pain.⁸

Favored children may develop guilt over not being abused.⁸

1 in 4 children will experience maltreatment in their lifetime.²

80% of 21-year-olds who had been abused met the criteria for at least 1 psychiatric disorder.²

Children who have been abused are . . .

59% more likely to be arrested as a juvenile.³

30% more likely to commit violent crime.³

25% less likely to practice safe sex.³

Conclusion & Discussion

What about the survey?

- Due to time constraints and the sensitivity of the issue, we were unable to distribute our survey as widely as we had hoped, and this didn’t get enough data for our results to be statistically accurate. However, we would like to put our survey here for anyone to participate in or replicate in future studies.

Why research abuse?

- We felt that this was an area that was typically overlooked by the general public. Because most instances of child abuse happen behind closed doors (especially emotional abuse), it is easy to believe that child abuse is not a problem within our community. However, the results of a survey conducted in Santa Clara County high schools in May 2011, 23% of the students surveyed had experienced a form of physical abuse within their family. Emotional abuse can be even harder to identify, as it does not leave a physical mark on the child experiencing it, and many people are uninformed about the ways emotional abuse can manifest. Although it was harder to research a type of maltreatment that was less understood, the ambiguity surrounding emotional abuse is partly why we chose to focus on this type of maltreatment.

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