

# Why Does Child Maltreatment Happen?

Child maltreatment is a complex issue. There are multiple personal and environmental factors that can lead to child maltreatment. Factors at the individual, family, community, and societal levels all interact and contribute to child maltreatment. When risk factors outweigh protective factors, negative outcomes, such as child maltreatment, are more likely to occur.

## Risk Factors

Research has identified many risk factors that increase the likelihood of child maltreatment. There are many pathways leading to child maltreatment; risk factors should not be viewed as direct links to child abuse or neglect. Many families with multiple risk factors never maltreat their children. It is important to view a specific risk factor or a combination of risk factors as characteristics that increase the likelihood of maltreatment occurring, but do not necessarily cause it to happen.

### Child Risk Factors

- Young children (under thirty-six months) are at the highest risk for physical maltreatment, neglect, and homicide.
- Pubescent children are at highest risk for sexual abuse reporting, although case histories suggest that the abuse may start earlier.
- There are few gender differences in physical abuse and neglect; however, girls are at higher risk for sexual abuse.
- Conduct problems and children with difficult temperaments have been identified as higher risk. However, this risk factor should be viewed with caution as many children may develop behavioral problems because of maltreatment.
- Children with disabilities (physical handicaps, developmental disabilities, birth complications) have a higher probability of abuse or neglect.

### Parental Risk Factors

- Single parenting, low education levels, and teen parenting all seem to increase risk for maltreatment. Maltreatment occurs among all socio-economic levels; however, there is still relatively higher risk for maltreatment among families with low-income, low socioeconomic status.
- There is a higher risk of maltreatment among parents who were past perpetrators of maltreatment and those who have a history of being maltreated as a child (although two-thirds of victims do not maltreat their own children).
- Maltreating parents often have inadequate knowledge of child development leading to unrealistic expectations of what children know or can do. Other risk factors include parental beliefs about child rearing, negative affect in the parent-child relationship, substance abuse problems, depression, and loneliness.
- Child sex offenders may demonstrate cognitive distortions, lack of empathy, negative affect, poor social skills, alcohol or substance abuse problems, and deviant sexual interests.

### Family Risk Factors

- Lack of resources, a large number of children (four or more), closely spaced pregnancies, current stressors (financial, job, health, loss of loved ones), marital conflict or violence, social isolation from other families, other family members with a history of maltreatment, and inadequate monitoring by other family members are all risk factors for maltreatment.
- Family disruption, separation, and divorce are risk factors for child sexual abuse. Children living with a mother and non-biological father have an increased risk for child sexual abuse.

### **Community Risk Factors**

- Neighborhoods with high mobility, unemployment, poverty, and a lack of monitoring and connectedness show greater rates of maltreatment.
- Communities with a military presence, natural disasters or crises, inadequate financing of human services, or inadequate human service coordination also demonstrate higher rates of maltreatment.

### **Cultural Risk Factors**

- The risk for child maltreatment is higher in those cultures where it is the societal norm to spank or victimize children or corporal punishment is legally allowed. Societies in which children have poor legal status or children are viewed as possessions also have higher risk factors for maltreatment. Finally, children are at greater risk for maltreatment in cultures where understanding of child development is weak or media portrayal of violence is common.

### **Protective Factors**

Although the literature is not as extensive with regard to factors that protect against maltreatment, there are some characteristics that have been identified as both protecting against maltreatment and contributing to general child and family well-being.

#### **Child Protective Factors**

- Children with easy temperaments, high cognitive abilities, and competence in normative roles have decreased risk of maltreatment.

#### **Parent Protective Factors**

- Psychological health and maturity enables parents to form positive attachments to their children and to others. Social competence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are parental qualities that help protect against child maltreatment.
- Additionally, a parent's own childhood experiences and family history contribute to the parent's ability to function effectively. The nurturing, stimulation, and appropriate care that a parent received as a child serves as an enduring protective factor.

#### **Family Protective Factors**

- Supportive relationships with family, friends, and neighbors are critical in helping parents navigate and overcome the daily stresses of parenting. Social support networks help parents do a better job of parenting through sharing of resources and information, offering temporary or permanent alternative shelter for children when needed, and providing collective standards of parenting behavior.

- The family strengths literature points to a number of characteristics that contribute to family well-being. These characteristics include regular and consistent household routines, shared parent-child activities, respectful and trusting communication, monitoring, supervision and involvement, parent-child warmth and supportiveness, good quality relationship between parents, children's participation in extracurricular school activities, and parents' involvement in religious and volunteer activities.

### Community Protective Factors

- Access to adequate healthcare, quality education, and employment services benefit adult caretakers and protect children. Families will find support for raising their children in neighborhoods where there is friendship among neighbors, watchfulness for other families, physical safety of the environment, common knowledge of community resources, and perhaps most critically a sense of "belonging" that fosters feelings of ownership and responsibility.

### Societal Protective Factors

- There is some evidence that cultures that discourage violence, support basic family needs, and discourage physical punishment do a better job of preventing maltreatment.

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