

DEFINING AND COMPREHENDING CHILD ABUSE AT PRESENT TIMES. - AN APPRAISAL -

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Child abuse is generally defined as "any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or another caregiver of a child that results in harm/ potential harm, or threat of harm to a child". According to Herrenkohl, R.C. (2005), child abuse is "any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm to a child".¹ These two definitions show that the idea of child abuse is a very broad one and involves several academic disciplines such as law, sociology, psychology, medicine etc, in addressing the. Also there is no uniformity among scholars in defining child abuse.

Abuse of children is more than bruises and broken bones. While physical abuse might be the most visible sign, other types of child abuse such as emotional abuse or neglect, also leave deep, long lasting scars. When abused children get help early, their chances of recovery and heal from their abuse is greater: limiting the cycle to perpetuate. While physical abuse is shocking due to the injuries and scars it leave, not all child abuse is as obvious as expected.

Children should be able to predict, understand the structure and clear boundaries, and have knowledge that their parents are looking after their safety. Research has shown that abused children could not have predicted how their parents/ caretakers would act. Their world is an unpredictable, frightening one with no rules. Whether the abuse is a slap, a harsh comment, stony silence, or not knowing if there will be dinner on the table at night, the end result is a child that feels unsafe, uncared for, and alone.

The incidence of child abuse in real life is difficult to ascertain as many cases are concealed. It is reported that one third of child abuses occur during first 6 months of life and another third during 6 months to 3 years².

The attempt of this communication is to highlight some up-to-date key ideas concerning child abuse.

WHO ABUSES CHILDREN?

While abuse by strangers does happen, most abusers are family members or others close to the family. It is true that abused children are more likely to repeat the cycle of abuse as adults: unconsciously imitating what they experienced as children. Ironically, many adult survivors of child abuse have a strong motivation to protect their children against what they went through as children and become excellent parents.

Not all abusers are intentionally harming their children. Many have been victims of abuse themselves, and don't know any other way to parent other than abusive modes. It crosses all racial, economic, and cultural lines.

CAUSES OF CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes.³ Understanding the causes of abuse is crucial to addressing the problem of child abuse. Parents who physically abuse their spouses are more likely than others to physically abuse their children⁴. However, it is impossible to know whether marital strife is a cause of child abuse, or if both the marital strife and the abuse are caused by tendencies in the abuser.

What are the different types of child abuse?

For purpose of classification, abuse or ill-treatment of children can be classified into four types, though more than one type can be found in each case.

1. Physical abuse

Physical abuse or Non Accidental Injury (NAI) is physical aggression directed at a child by an adult. It can involve striking, burning, bruising, choking or shaking a child.

Any part of the body can be injured; some can lead to permanent disability and even death. Most of the children who have been fatally injured are likely to have been assaulted several times. Thus

recognition of minor injuries and prompt action are very important.

COMMON INJURIES IN PHYSICAL ABUSE

Injuries of physical abuse can be very non specific. The following may act as pointers to physical abuse than of accidental nature.

1. Superficial injuries

Abrasions- linear abrasions are seen around ankles and wrists made due to ligature, imprinted abrasions made by common objects like belts are seen on the trunk.

Bruises- these are caused by extravasations of blood from broken capillaries under the skin.

Finger print bruises are seen around the mouth incurred while trying to stop the child from crying; around the arms when trying to restrain or during shaking the child. These are not associated with swelling compared to bruises caused by blunt objects which usually associated with swelling that can last for few days.

Pinches and bites cause typical marks on the skin.

2. Intracranial injuries

These may be caused by either direct trauma or by violent shaking. Multiple fractures involving the skull bones which are irregular rather than single linear cracks are suggestive of physical abuse. Growing fractures, subdural haematoma and cerebral edema are commoner in non accidentally injured than the others.

Shaking a child can cause shaken baby syndrome, which can lead to increased intracranial pressure with cerebral edema and diffuse axonal injury. The presentation can be with failure to thrive, vomiting, lethargy, seizures, bulging or tense fontanelles, altered breathing, and dilated pupils. It may be the result of a deliberate attempt to hurt the child.

3. Bony injuries

Accidental fractures of bones are likely to involve the arms and likely to be of greenstick type. In NAI they are more in the legs, spiral and multiple.

4. Burns

Burns due to NAI can be of different types. The following are common types.

Cigarette burns- circular burns with blistering in a body part easily immobilized are likely due to non accidental in origin.

Immersion burns- scalds up to the level of immersion of hot water are likely to be due to non accidental.

5. Visceral injuries

Most common are tears of mesentery and perforation of small intestine. Perforation of the stomach and bladder are unusual so are the tears of the liver and the spleen³

Many physically abusive parents and caregivers insist that their actions are simply forms of disciplined ways to make children learn to behave. But there is a big difference between using physical punishment to discipline and physical abuse.

PHYSICAL ABUSE VS. DISCIPLINE

In physical abuse, unlike physical forms of discipline, the following elements are present:

- **Unpredictability.** The child never knows what is going to set the parent off. There are no clear boundaries or rules. The child is constantly walking on eggshells, never sure what behavior will trigger a physical assault.
- **Lashing out in anger.** Physically abusive parents act out of anger and the desire to assert control, not the motivation to lovingly teach the child. The angrier the parent, the more intense the abuse.
- **Using fear to control behavior.** Parents who are physically abusive may believe that their children need to fear them in order to behave, so they use physical abuse to keep their child in line. However, what children are really learning is how to avoid being hit, not how to behave or grow as individuals.

2. Emotional child abuse

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me”. Contrary to this old saying, emotional abuse can severely damage a child’s

mental health or social development, leaving lifelong psychological scars. Examples of emotional child abuse include:

- Constant belittling, shaming, and humiliating a child
- Calling names and making negative comparisons to others
- Telling a child he or she is "no good," "worthless," "bad," or "a mistake."
- Frequent yelling, threatening, or bullying.
- Ignoring or rejecting a child as punishment, giving him or her silent treatment.
- Limited physical contact with the child—no hugs, kisses, or other signs of affection.
- Exposing the child to violence or the abuse of others, whether it is the abuse of a parent, a sibling, or even a pet.

3. Child neglect

Child neglect— a very common type of child abuse is a pattern of failing to provide for a child's basic needs, whether it be adequate food, clothing, hygiene, or supervision. Child neglect is not always easy to spot. Sometimes, a parent might become physically or mentally unable to care for a child, such as with a serious injury, untreated depression, or anxiety. Other times, alcohol or drug abuse may seriously impair judgment and the ability to keep a child safe.

Older children might not show outward signs of neglect, becoming used to presenting a competent face to the outside world, and even taking on the role of the parent. But at the end of the day, neglected children are not getting their physical and emotional needs met.

4. Child sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is an especially complicated form of abuse because of its layers of guilt and shame. It's important to recognize that sexual abuse doesn't always involve body contact. Exposing a child to sexual situations or material is sexually abusive, whether or not touching is involved.

While media stories of sexual predators are scary, what is even more frightening is that sexual abuse usually occurs at the hands of someone the child knows and should be able to trust—most often close relatives. In contrary to what many believe, it's not just girls who are at risk. Boys and girls both suffer from sexual abuse. In fact, sexual abuse of boys may be underreported due to shame and stigma.

Aside from the physical damage that sexual abuse can cause, the emotional component is powerful and far-reaching. Sexually abused children are tormented by shame and guilt. They may feel that they are responsible for the abuse or somehow brought it upon themselves. This can lead to self-loathing and sexual problems as they grow older; often either excessive promiscuity or an inability to have intimate relations.

The shame of sexual abuse makes it very difficult for children to come forward. They may worry that others won't believe them, will be angry with them, or that it will split their family apart. Because of these difficulties, false accusations of sexual abuse are not common.

How do we identify child abuse early?

Earlier the child abuse is caught, better the chance of recovery and opportunity for appropriate treatment for the child. Child abuse is not always obvious. By learning some of the common warning signs of child abuse and neglect, one can catch the problem as early as possible and get both the child and the abuser the help that they need.

Of course, just because you see a warning sign doesn't automatically mean a child is being abused. It's important to dig deeper, looking for a pattern of abusive behavior and warning signs.

Warning signs of physical abuse in children

- Frequent injuries or unexplained bruises, welts, or cuts.
- Is always watchful and "on alert," as if waiting for something bad to happen.
- Injuries appear to have a pattern such as marks from a hand or belt.
- Shies away from touch, flinches at sudden movements, or seems afraid to go home. Wears inappropriate clothing to cover up injuries, such as long-sleeved shirts on hot days.

Warning signs of emotional abuse in children

- Excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong.
- Shows extremes in behavior (extremely compliant or extremely demanding; extremely passive or extremely aggressive).
- Doesn't seem to be attached to the parent or caregiver.
- Acts either inappropriately adult (taking care of other children) or inappropriately infantile (rocking, thumb-sucking, tantruming).

Warning signs of neglect in children

- Clothes are ill-fitting, filthy, or inappropriate for the weather.
- Hygiene is consistently bad (unbathed, matted and unwashed hair, noticeable body odor).
- Untreated illnesses and physical injuries.
- Is frequently unsupervised or left alone or allowed to play in unsafe situations and environments.
- Is frequently late or missing from school.

Warning signs of sexual abuse in children

- Trouble walking or sitting.
- Displays knowledge or interest in sexual acts inappropriate to his or her age, or even seductive behavior.
- Makes strong efforts to avoid a specific person, without an obvious reason.
- Doesn't want to change clothes in front of others or participate in physical activities.
- An STD or pregnancy, especially under the age of 14.
- Runs away from home.

Risk factors for child abuse and neglect

While child abuse and neglect occurs in all types of families— even in those that look happy from the outside— children are at a much greater risk in certain situations.

- **Domestic violence:** Witnessing domestic violence is terrifying to children and emotionally abusive. Even if the mother does her best to protect her children and keeps them from being physically abused, the situation is still extremely damaging.
- **Alcohol and drug abuse:** Living with an alcoholic or addict is very difficult for children and can easily lead to abuse and neglect. Parents who are drunk are unable to care for their children, make good parenting decisions, and control often-dangerous impulses. Substance abuse also commonly leads to physical abuse.
- **Untreated mental illness:** Parents who suffer from depression, an anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, or another mental illness have trouble taking care of themselves, much less their children. A mentally ill or traumatized parent may be distant and withdrawn from his or her children, or quick to anger without understanding why. Treatment for the caregiver means better care for the children.

- **Lack of parenting skills:** Some caregivers never learned the skills necessary for good parenting. Teen parents, for example, might have unrealistic expectations about how much care babies and small children need. Or parents who were themselves victims of child abuse may only know how to raise their children the way they were raised. In such cases, parenting classes, therapy, and caregiver support groups are great resources for learning better parenting skills.

- **Stress and lack of support:** Parenting can be a very time-intensive, difficult job, especially if you're raising children without support from family, friends, or the community or you're dealing with relationship problems or financial difficulties. Caring for a child with a disability, special needs, or difficult behaviors is also a challenge. It's important to get the support you need, so you are emotionally and physically able to support your child.

Talking to suspected abused children

- **Avoid denial and remain calm:** A common reaction to news as unpleasant and shocking as child abuse is denial. However, if you display denial to a child, or show shock or disgust at what they are saying, the child may be afraid to continue and will shut down. As hard as it may be, remain as calm and reassuring as you can.
- **Don't interrogate:** Let the child explain to you in his or her own words what happened, but don't interrogate the child or ask leading questions. This may confuse and fluster the child and make it harder for them to continue their story.
- **Reassure the child that they did nothing wrong:** It takes a lot for a child to come forward about abuse. Reassure him or her that you take what is said seriously, and that it is not the child's fault.
- **Safety comes first:** If you feel that your safety or the safety of the child would be threatened if you try to intervene, leave it to the professionals. You may be able to provide more support later after the initial professional intervention.

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