Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC 24/7: Saving Lives, Protecting People™

Child Abuse and Neglect: Risk and Protective Factors

A combination of individual, relational, community, and societal factors contribute to the risk of child abuse and neglect. Although children are not responsible for the harm inflicted upon them, certain characteristics have been found to increase their risk of being maltreated. Risk factors are those characteristics associated with child abuse and neglect—they may or may not be direct causes.

Risk Factors for Victimization

Individual Risk Factors

- Children younger than 4 years of age
- Special needs that may increase caregiver burden (e.g., disabilities, mental health issues, and chronic physical illnesses)

Risk Factors for Perpetration

Individual Risk Factors

- Parents' lack of understanding of children's needs, child development and parenting skills
- Parents' history of child maltreatment in family of origin
- Substance abuse and/or mental health issues including depression in the family
- Parental characteristics such as young age, low education, single parenthood, large number of dependent children, and low income
- Nonbiological, transient caregivers in the home (e.g., mother's male partner)
- Parental thoughts and emotions that tend to support or justify maltreatment behaviors

Family Risk Factors

- Social isolation
- Family disorganization, dissolution, and violence, including intimate partner violence
- Parenting stress, poor parent-child relationships, and negative interactions

Community Risk Factors

- Community violence
- Concentrated neighborhood disadvantage (e.g., high poverty and residential instability, high unemployment rates, and high density of alcohol outlets), and poor social connections.

Protective Factors for Child Maltreatment

Protective factors buffer children from being abused or neglected. These factors exist at various levels. Protective factors have not been studied as extensively or rigorously as risk factors. However, identifying and understanding protective factors are equally as important as researching risk factors.

There is scientific evidence to support the following protective factor:

Family Protective Factors

- Supportive family environment and social networks

Several other potential protective factors have been identified. Research is ongoing to determine whether the following factors do indeed buffer children from maltreatment.

Family Protective Factors

- Nurturing parenting skills
- Stable family relationships
- Household rules and child monitoring
- Parental employment
- Adequate housing

- Access to health care and social services
- Caring adults outside the family who can serve as role models or mentors

Community Protective Factors

- Communities that support parents and take responsibility for preventing abuse

Additional Resources

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study
  The ACE Study examines the links between adverse childhood experiences including child abuse, neglect, and various household challenges, and adult health.
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (http://www.developingchild.net)
  The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child is a multidisciplinary collaboration comprising leading scholars in neuroscience, early childhood development, pediatrics, and economics.
- **Literature Reviews**
  - Runyan D, Wattam C, Ikeda R, Hassan F, Ramiro L. Child abuse and neglect by parents and caregivers. In: Krug E, Dahlberg LL, Mercy JA, Zwi AB, Lozano R, editors. World report on violence and health. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization; 2002. p. 59-86. Available from: www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap3.pdf [PDF 176 KB] (http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap3.pdf)
  - U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2017). *Child Maltreatment 2015*. Available from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment (http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment)
  - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACF). Emerging practices in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Washington (DC): Government Printing Office; 2003. Available from: https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/emerging_practices_report.pdf [PDF 2 MB] (https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/emerging_practices_report.pdf)

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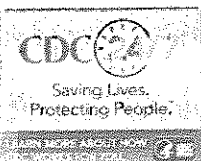To receive email updates about this page, enter your email address:

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