

Child Abuse and Neglect

Ulfat Amin¹, Batula Rashid¹, Rohi Jan¹, Roohi Jan¹, Adil Mudasir Malla²

¹Faculty Syed Mantaqui College of Nursing, Islamic University of Science and Technology, Pulwama, Kashmir, ²PhD, Computer Science Engineering Islamic University of Science and Technology, Pulwama, Kashmir, India

Abstract

Abuse and neglect are major worldwide issues that can take the form of sexual, spiritual, emotional or completely failing to provide for the child's needs. These issues can trigger serious, long-term mental harm to the child. Child abuse is a complex and dynamic life experience when a parent or caregiver causes harm or threat to a child, including acts of omission and commission. The large variability in notified prevalence and incidence across studies makes determining the true number of maltreated children difficult. Following PRISMA guidelines, databases from MEDLINE, EMBASE, Web of Science and PubMed were used to review the literature. The terms 'Child Abuse, Child Neglect, Impact of Child abuse, Forms of Abuse' were used as keywords as per the Medical Subject Headings. Studies in English have always been included. Grey literature was also examined to learn more about the epidemiology and treatment of this particular issue. Child abuse and neglect of any kind leave a child with long-lasting scars, which can be physiological or emotional. Childhood exposure to violence can raise a child's vulnerability to adverse health outcomes such as social anxiety, distress and so on, as well as make people more likely to become victimisers later in life. Preventative policies and programs must specifically address children, their guardians and the social and cultural contexts to minimise future abuse and effectively deal with instances of violence and neglect that have occurred.

Keywords: Abuse, effects, maltreatment, neglect

INTRODUCTION

Child maltreatment is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as 'all kinds of physical and emotional suffering, child molestation, abandonment and exploitation that result in potential damage to the well-being of a child, growth or dignity'.^[1] Neglect, physical abuse, psychological abuse and sexual abuse are the four main types of abuse. Abuse is defined as an act of commission in the care, whereas neglect is defined as an act of omission in the care that results in actual or potential harm. Inadequate healthcare system, education, guidance, preservation from environmental hazards and unfilled basic needs like clothing and food are examples of neglect.^[2-4] In the United States, over 4 million referrals of child abuse or neglect were made to these agencies, and approximately 678,000 children were found to be victims of abuse or neglect.^[5] According to the WHO, worldwide, an estimated 1 billion children experience violence every year. This includes physical, sexual and emotional abuse, as well as neglect.^[6] In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 1 in 7 children has experienced abuse or neglect in the past year.^[7] About 75% of children

aged 2–4 years, equivalent to 300 million children, experience regular physical punishment or psychological violence from their caregivers and parents. Twenty percent of women and 7.7% of men report experiencing sexual abuse during their childhood, when they were aged between 0 and 17 years. Approximately 120 million girls and young women under the age of 20 have been subjected to forced sexual contact.^[8] According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development, in 2019, there were over 106,000 cases of crimes against children reported in India. This includes cases of child abuse, child trafficking and child labor.^[9]

From 2011 to 2017, there were 1285 reported cases of child abuse in Kashmir, according to a report by the Jammu and Kashmir State Commission for Protection of Child Rights in

Address for correspondence: Ms. Ulfat Amin, Child Health Nursing of Faculty, SMMCNT, Islamic University of Science and Technology, Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir, India. E-mail: ulfat.amin@islamicuniversity.edu.in

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2018. A 2019 study by the organisation Child Rights and You revealed that three out of every five children in Kashmir had undergone some kind of violence, which included physical, sexual or emotional abuse.^[10] In 2020, the Jammu and Kashmir Police launched a campaign to raise awareness about child abuse, stating that they had received over 200 complaints of child abuse in the first 6 months of the year.^[11] The most prevalent type of child abuse is neglect.^[12] A large number of child abuse cases are quite often overlooked by healthcare professionals. A high index of suspicion is required to make a diagnosis of child abuse.^[13]

CHILD ABUSE

Child abuse is a global problem affecting millions of children of all ages, races and socio-economic backgrounds. It can be defined as any form of physical, emotional or sexual harm inflicted upon a child by an adult or older child. Child abuse can also include neglect, which is the failure to provide for a child's basic needs such as food, shelter and medical care. Child abuse can have long-lasting and devastating effects on a child's physical and mental health, as well as their ability to form relationships and trust others.^[14] Some common forms of child abuse include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. It is important to recognise the signs of child abuse and to take action to protect children from harm.

Some common forms of child abuse are:

- i. **Physical:** Signs of physical abuse may include recurrent injuries such as blisters, welts or burns, injuries that resemble the shape of an object (such as a belt or electrical cord) or injuries that are unlikely given the child's age and abilities, such as broken ribs in an infant who is not yet able to walk or jump. Conflicting explanations of injuries between parents, strange explanations for the injury, neglect of the child's basic needs such as lack of hygiene and proper nutrition and inappropriate clothing for the weather are also indicators of potential abuse. Physical abuse can take many forms, including beating, shaking, burning and biting, and it can be difficult to distinguish from physical punishment. Common physical injuries associated with abuse include rib fractures, cuts, bruises, haematomas, fractures, head injuries, internal injuries, burns, eye injuries, blunt trauma, injuries from slapping, pushing, squeezing, kicking, shaking and 'shaken baby syndrome'.^[15-18]
- ii. **Sexual:** Sexual abuse is a form of exploitation where dependent and underdeveloped children and adolescents are involved in sexual activities that they may not fully comprehend and cannot give their consent to. These activities violate the social norms of family life. Sexual harassment may take various forms, including exposure to sexually explicit material, oral-genital contact, genital-to-genital contact, genital-to-anal contact, genital stroking and other activities that do not involve oral, anal or vaginal penetration. Children who engage in behaviours such as undressing in front of others, attempting to touch others' genital area or trying to observe others who are partially clothed may be at risk of sexual abuse. It is important to note that a routine physical examination may not always detect sexual abuse, as most victims have normal genital tract evaluations. In most cases, the child's statement is the strongest evidence that sexual abuse has occurred. Symptoms such as difficulty walking or sitting, stained or bloody underwear, pain, itching, inflammation, skin irritation or discharge from the genital or rectal area, as well as bruising or other injuries to the genital or rectal area, may indicate sexual abuse.^[10,11]
- iii. **Behavioural:** Some signs of behavioural abuse in children may include a fear of adult contact, aggressive behaviour, anxiety in response to crying or shouting, a desire to spend as little time as possible at home, excessive compliance or attachment, freely connecting with strangers, recurring absences, refusal to comply, failure to report harm or providing a woefully inadequate explanation for an injury.^[16,19]
- iv. **Emotional:** Emotional abuse of a child refers to a series of behaviours that can have a negative impact on a child's emotional development and self-esteem. This form of abuse can take many forms, such as criticising or humiliating the child, belittling their achievements or personal qualities, constantly showing disapproval or rejection or withholding love, guidance or direction. Children who experience emotional abuse may display symptoms such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, passivity, withdrawal, self-pity and social difficulties. They may also exhibit behaviour disorders, such as chewing, nibbling or rocking and may experience delays in academic or physical development. Emotional abuse can lead to speech disorders and failure-to-thrive syndrome and can contribute to suicidal ideation. Emotional abuse can stem from a variety of factors, such as parental overprotection, strained family relationships, poverty, a lack of resources, mental illness and a history of abuse experienced by the parent. Unlike physical abuse, emotional abuse does not often result in visible physical symptoms.^[16,20]
- v. **Exploitation.**
 - **Sexual:** Children are used for sex slavery trading activities, pornographic materials, affiliated abuse and exploitation and so on.^[21]
 - **Entertainment:** Using children as jockeys in camel races in Gulf nations, street parties and street showcases involving non-domesticated animals such as monkeys, bears, elephants, camels, snakes and so on, rope strolling, pole hopping, building pyramids for religious celebrations, fire bouncing or fire gulping in circus or sailor actions
 - **Social:** Benefits include the use of children by school systems, foster homes, Civil society groups and many others for formal welcome programs, protests and rallies, as well as letting children stay in conditions

such as extreme weather for long periods without providing clean water or public toilets

- Political: For use in military conflicts, political rhetoric during election campaigns and so on^[22,23]
- Child labour: In India, the number of child labourers is estimated to be 10.1 million, with 5.6 million being boys and 4.5 million being girls. Globally, it is estimated that 152 million children, including 64 million girls and 88 million boys, are involved in child labour, which amounts to nearly one in ten of all children worldwide. Despite a decrease in the incidence of child labour in recent years, it continues to exist in severe forms such as bonded labour, child soldiers and trafficking. Child labourers can be found across various industries in India, including brick kilns, carpet weaving, garment making, domestic service, food and refreshment services, agriculture, fisheries and mining. Additionally, children are vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation and production of child pornography.^[24]

NEGLECT

Child neglect is defined as the intentional, non-accidental injury or malnutrition of children by their parents, caregivers, employers or the others, including those portraying Government/non-Government bodies, which may result in permanent or temporary impairment of their physical, intellectual, psycho-social advancement, impairment or death. Children, especially infants are the most underprivileged victims of abuse due to their absolute reliance on their parents. It is a piece of horrific evidence that children suffer far more in the arms of their friends and parents than in the arms of bystanders.^[21,24] Some common forms of child neglect are:

- Nutritional: In today's world, child nutritional neglect could indeed result in undernourishment, mainly in developing nations or obese children in developed countries. Its indicators include the following: Going to beg or steal things, continuously hungry, Searching for food in garbage cans; self-indulgent eating in large swigs; food stockpiling; overweight or obese; bingeing on unhealthy food, failure to thrive, marasmus, stunting and deprivation of varying severity
- Substance abuse: Neglected children are at a higher risk of using substances compared to their peers who receive adequate care and attention. Neglect can lead to a range of emotional, behavioural and cognitive problems that increase the likelihood of substance use. Neglected children often experience low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and stress, which can drive them towards substance use as a coping mechanism. Additionally, neglect often leads to a lack of supervision and guidance, leaving children to fend for themselves. This can expose them to negative influences such as peers who use drugs and alcohol. Neglected children may also be more likely to engage in risky behaviours as a result of feeling disconnected from their families

and communities. Furthermore, neglected children may experience physical and emotional pain, which can drive them towards substance use as a means of self-medicating. This can result in the development of addiction and the need for ongoing substance use to manage their pain. Overall, neglect can contribute to the development of risk factors that increase the likelihood of substance use in children. Addressing neglect and providing appropriate care and support to children is crucial in reducing the risk of substance use and its negative consequences

- Medical neglect: Medical neglect in children refers to a type of neglect in which the caretaker or parent fails to provide adequate medical care or treatment to a child, leading to the child's physical, emotional or developmental health being put at risk. This can include delaying or avoiding necessary medical treatment, failing to follow up on medical recommendations or referrals and not providing preventive healthcare such as immunisations or regular check-ups. Medical neglect can be intentional or unintentional and can occur due to various factors such as poverty, lack of education or awareness, cultural beliefs or mental health issues. The consequences of medical neglect can be severe and can lead to the child's illness, injury, disability or death. Therefore, it is crucial to identify and address medical neglect promptly to protect the child's health and well-being^[16]
- Miscellaneous: Munchausen's Syndrome by Proxy is a type of child abuse where a parent or caregiver falsifies or induces illness in a child to gain attention and feel important. Caregivers may provide false information or induce symptoms by administering medication or tampering with diagnostic samples. Diagnosis requires ruling out legitimate illnesses and establishing a strong suspicion of abuse. Early detection and treatment are crucial as it can be fatal if left untreated.^[25-27]

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis of child abuse and neglect can be challenging, as it often involves identifying patterns of behaviour rather than specific symptoms or signs. It typically requires a thorough assessment of the child's physical and emotional health, as well as their family and social environment.

- Child abuse is not always obvious at the outset of a consultation. In all contexts of injuries at unusual distribution sites or with an unexpected pattern, one should suspect child abuse
- Clinical symptoms are bizarre and often uniform
- If the abused children and parents' histories differ or if the features do not match with recognised conditions/disease/disorder
- The child is sleep-deprived, comatose or emotionally frightened
- He or she is too stunned to say anything
- Importantly, the injuries are more severe/grievous than would be expected based on the history.^[28]

EFFECTS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Child abuse and neglect can have a wide range of negative effects on children. Some of the common effects of child abuse and neglect include:

- i. **Physical health problems:** Physical abuse and neglect can result in a range of physical health problems, including bruises, broken bones, burns and other injuries. Neglect can also lead to malnutrition, failure to thrive and other health problems
- ii. **Mental health problems:** Children who experience abuse and neglect are at increased risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse
- iii. **Behavioural problems:** Children who experience abuse and neglect may exhibit a range of behavioural problems, such as aggression, withdrawal and difficulty forming relationships with others
- iv. **Poor academic performance:** Children who experience abuse and neglect may struggle academically due to a range of factors, including disrupted education, mental health problems and lack of support from caregivers
- v. **Social problems:** Children who experience abuse and neglect may have difficulty forming healthy relationships with others, which can lead to social isolation and difficulties in forming healthy adult relationships
- vi. **Long-term health problems:** Some of the effects of child abuse and neglect may not become apparent until later in life. For example, adults who experienced childhood abuse and neglect may be at increased risk of chronic health problems such as heart disease and diabetes.

It's important to note that not all children who experience abuse and neglect will exhibit these effects and the severity of the effects can vary depending on a range of factors, including the type and duration of the abuse or neglect, the child's age and developmental stage and the availability of support and resources. Early intervention and support can help to mitigate some of these negative effects and promote healing and resilience in children who have experienced abuse and neglect.^[28-30]

MANAGEMENT

The management for various forms of child abuse varies depending on the type of abuse. Here are some general guidelines for managing child abuse:

- i. **Physical abuse:** The first step is to ensure the child's safety by removing them from the abusive environment. The child may require medical attention for injuries. It is important to report the abuse to the authorities, who may conduct an investigation and take legal action against the perpetrator. Counselling or therapy is also needed to help the child cope with the trauma of the abuse
- ii. **Sexual abuse:** Like physical abuse, the child's safety is the top priority. The child may require medical attention and a forensic examination to collect evidence.

Reporting the abuse to the authorities is critical, as is providing counselling or therapy to help the child cope with the trauma. The child also need ongoing medical care and treatment for sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy, if applicable

- iii. **Emotional abuse:** Treatment for emotional abuse involves therapy or counselling to help the child develop coping mechanisms and build self-esteem. The child may also benefit from a supportive and stable environment, such as a loving family or foster care placement
- iv. **Neglect:** Neglect can be addressed by providing the child with basic needs, such as food, shelter and medical care. The child may require medical attention for any health problems related to neglect. If the child is removed from the neglectful environment, they need to be placed in a safe and stable environment, such as foster care. Counselling or therapy is also needed to help the child cope with the trauma of neglect
- v. **Munchausen syndrome by proxy:** Treatment for this type of abuse typically involves removing the child from the abusive environment and providing them with medical care and treatment for any harm caused by the abuse. The caregiver responsible for the abuse require psychiatric evaluation and treatment. The child also need therapy or counselling to cope with the trauma of the abuse.^[15,31,32]

Overall, management for child abuse and neglect involves prioritising the child's safety and well-being, providing medical care as needed, reporting the abuse to the authorities and providing ongoing support and counselling to help the child cope with the trauma.

PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Preventing child abuse and neglect requires a multi-faceted approach that involves individuals, families, communities and governments. Here are some strategies that can help prevent child abuse and neglect:

- i. **Educating parents and caregivers:** Providing education on child development, positive parenting techniques and the risks and consequences of child abuse and neglect can help parents and caregivers provide a safe and nurturing environment for children
- ii. **Strengthening families:** Offering support services to families experiencing stress, such as mental health services, financial assistance and parenting classes, can help reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect
- iii. **Encouraging community involvement:** Creating a sense of community and encouraging individuals to look out for the welfare of children can help prevent child abuse and neglect. This can be achieved through neighbourhood watch programs, mentoring programs and community events
- iv. **Reporting suspected abuse or neglect:** Anyone who suspects that a child is being abused or neglected should report it to the appropriate authorities immediately. This can help protect the child and prevent further abuse

- v. Establishing and enforcing child protection laws: Governments can play a crucial role in preventing child abuse and neglect by enacting and enforcing laws that protect children from harm. This includes laws that criminalise child abuse and neglect, as well as laws that require reporting of suspected abuse or neglect.^[13,33,34]

EDUCATION FOR PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Education is an essential component of preventing child abuse and neglect. Here are some ways education can be used to prevent child abuse and neglect:

- i. Public awareness campaigns: Public awareness campaigns can be designed to inform the general public about child abuse and neglect. These campaigns can educate people on the signs and symptoms of abuse, what to do if they suspect a child is being abused and how to report suspected cases of abuse
- ii. Parenting education: Providing parenting education to parents and caregivers can help them develop healthy parenting practices and reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. Parenting education can cover topics such as child development, positive discipline, stress management and communication skills
- iii. Education for children: Children can be taught personal safety skills and how to recognise and report abuse. Schools can provide age-appropriate education about abuse and neglect, including information about what to do if a child is being abused
- iv. Professional training: Professionals who work with children, such as teachers, social workers and healthcare providers, can receive training on how to recognise and respond to child abuse and neglect. This training can help professionals identify cases of abuse and provide appropriate support and resources to children and families
- v. Community involvement: Engaging the community in efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect can be an effective way to promote awareness and education. Community organisations, faith-based groups and other groups can work together to support families and promote healthy parenting practices.^[13,33,34]

Overall, education is a crucial aspect of preventing child abuse and neglect. By educating the public, parents, children, professionals and the community, we can work together to create a safer and healthier environment for all children.

CONCLUSION

Child abuse and neglect are serious and prevalent issues that can have long-lasting physical, emotional and psychological effects on children. There are several types of child abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional and neglect. Child abuse can happen in any setting and by any person, including family members, caregivers or strangers. It is important to recognise the signs of child abuse and neglect and take action to report

suspected abuse. Prevention efforts can include education and awareness campaigns, as well as implementing policies and programs that support families and protect children. It is essential to work towards creating a society where children can grow up in a safe and supportive environment free from abuse and neglect.

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