

Child Maltreatment: A Quick Snapshot

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What is child maltreatment?

Child maltreatment is considered either actions or inactions by a parent or caregiver that result in harm, potential for harm, or a threat of harm to a child.



Types of maltreatment may include:

1. **Physical abuse** - acts that cause (or create risk) of physical harm (e.g. hitting).
 2. **Psychological maltreatment** - behaviours that harm the child's mental health (e.g. demeaning language).
 3. **Sexual abuse** - where the child is used for a sexual purpose including contact abuse (e.g. sexual acts) and non-contact abuse (e.g. exhibitionism or pornography).
 4. **Neglect** - failure to meet a child's basic physical or social needs (e.g. shelter, food, appropriate supervision, attention or love), and failure to ensure a child's safety.
 5. **Witnessing family violence** – seeing or hearing violence, or abuse between adults.
- Psychological maltreatment and neglect may be the most damaging, as these can convey to a child that they are worthless, unloved, or unwanted.

- Children who are maltreated are often exposed to more than one type of maltreatment, which may have a greater effect.

What are the effects of child maltreatment?

Every child is unique, and the effects of maltreatment can differ widely. Some of the effects may be:

- physical injuries, which may require medical treatment, and potentially death
- mental health issues including internalising (e.g., depression and anxiety) and externalising behaviours (e.g., aggression)
- difficulties in learning and social development
- changes in brain structure, function, and systems that are important for managing stress, learning, and developing positive relationships.

Children who appear to show minimal effects of maltreatment during childhood (or the 'silent period') may show the effects later in life, particularly in adolescence.

The effects of child maltreatment may last a lifetime

Those who experience child maltreatment are at increased risk of:

- physical illness such as cardiovascular disease, obesity and diabetes, asthma, and cancer
- mental illness including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance use disorders.

What are the risk factors for child maltreatment?

Risk factors are conditions that are associated with increased likelihood of an unfavourable outcome, and maltreatment results from complex interactions between multiple risk factors:

- family (e.g. parental mental illness, substance abuse, and history of maltreatment as a child) and
- socioeconomic and societal (e.g., poverty, social isolation, and social norms about caregiving.)

What can we do?

Child maltreatment is very common in Aotearoa/New Zealand, affecting up to one in four children. This is a community problem, and we all have a role to play:

- Being aware of child maltreatment and listening to children. Supportive responses by a trusted adult to disclosures are essential.
- Rather than focusing on the challenging behaviour of a child, support them to address

underlying maltreatment. We should ask not, “what’s wrong with you?” but “what has happened to you?”

- Supporting parents and caregivers instead of blaming them.
- Working to address social and structural issues such as poverty.

Points to note:

- Child maltreatment should be seen as a failure of the community rather than of individual caregivers
- Harm from maltreatment may be intentional or unintentional
- The effects of child maltreatment can last a lifetime
- Recovery is possible and aided by early identification, supportive caregiving and access to trauma-focused therapies.

It takes a village to raise a family, and raising children in a safe and loving environment is the responsibility of the whole community.

Want to know more?

See the full article for more details and references:

The Lifetime Effects of Child Maltreatment

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/the-lifetime-effects-of-child-maltreatment/>

