



Child Maltreatment

Defining the Problem, Identifying Risk Factors, and Looking at Consequences

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) child maltreatment is abuse or neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to a child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Risk Factors for Child Maltreatment

Child: It is important to emphasize that **children are victims and never to blame** for maltreatment. Characteristics of an individual child that may increase the likelihood of being maltreated include:

- crying persistently
- being under four years old
- being an adolescent
- being unwanted
- having special needs
- having abnormal physical features
- failing to fulfil the expectations of parents
- having an intellectual disability or neurological disorder
- identifying as or being identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender

Parent or Caregiver: Characteristics of a caregiver that may increase the risk of child maltreatment include:

- difficulty bonding with a newborn
- having low self-esteem
- misusing alcohol or drugs
- having unrealistic expectations
- experiencing financial difficulties
- having been maltreated themselves as a child
- lacking awareness of child development
- suffering from poor impulse control
- having a mental or neurological disorder
- being involved in criminal activity

Additional: Characteristics of the relationships within families, friends and peers, as well as characteristics of communities and societies that may increase the risk of child maltreatment include:

- other family or partner violence
- being isolated in the community
- lacking a support network
- gender and social inequality
- lack of adequate housing or services
- high levels of unemployment or poverty
- the easy availability of alcohol and drugs
- inadequate policies and programmes for prevention
- social and cultural norms that promote violence
- social, economic, health and education policies that lead to poor living standards, or to socioeconomic inequality or instability

Consequences of Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment has severe short- and long-term physical, sexual and mental health consequences, including head injuries and severe disability, post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Adolescent girls may face additional health issues, including gynaecological disorders and unwanted pregnancy. Child maltreatment can affect cognitive and academic performance and is strongly associated with alcohol and drug abuse – key risk factors for noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) such as cardiovascular diseases and cancer.

If you suspect a child is being abused, reach out to the National Child Abuse Hotline: 800-422-4453 or visit: childhelpline.org. For additional guidance and support you can always reach out to the EAP.