

Child Physical Abuse and Neglect

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KEYWORDS

• Child maltreatment • Mandatory reporting • Child welfare • Child Protective Service

KEY POINTS

- Child maltreatment is common.
- Child physical abuse and neglect are 2 forms of child maltreatment.
- The maltreatment of children is a public health problem.
- There are possible lifelong consequences of child maltreatment to health and well-being.
- Additional resources are needed for the treatment and prevention of child maltreatment.
- Identifying suspected maltreatment and reporting concerns to child welfare can be one of the most challenging and important responsibilities of the pediatric health care provider.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1960s, public recognition of child abuse and neglect has improved considerably. The US Government enacted the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act in 1974, which defines maltreatment of a child as “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, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.”¹ Decades of research and clinical experience reveal that child abuse and neglect is a public health problem with lifelong health consequences for survivors.² Much has been learned about the factors that contribute to the abuse of a child and about characteristics that may prove protective. Despite the progress made, the problem remains widespread and serious. Programs to prevent and intervene in child maltreatment remain fragmented, and a more comprehensive and collaborative approach to public policy concerning child safety and health is needed. The topics of child physical abuse and neglect are discussed in this article. Murray discusses child sexual abuse elsewhere in this issue, and the impact of intimate partner violence on children is discussed in the article by MacMillan.

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EPIDEMIOLOGY

Each year in the United States, Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies receive more than 3 million reports of suspected child maltreatment and investigate more than 2 million of these reports; more than 650,000 children are substantiated by child welfare as maltreatment victims.³ Most maltreated children are victims of neglect (78.5%), 17.6% are victims of physical abuse, and 9.1% are victims of sexual abuse. More than 1500 child deaths are attributed annually to child abuse or neglect.³ However, these numbers reflect official investigations and represent only a portion of the children who suffer from maltreatment. For example, data from the Adverse Childhood Experiences studies indicate that 27% of adult women and 30% of adult men are estimated to have been physically abused during childhood, suggesting very high rates of undocumented child maltreatment.⁴

Recent child welfare statistics suggest that the incidence of child abuse and neglect is decreasing. However, child welfare data represent only those cases investigated and confirmed by state child welfare agencies, and thus are influenced by changes in reporting practices, investigation and legal standards, and administrative or statistical procedures.⁵ By contrast, researchers examining hospitalization rates for physical abuse have shown either no significant recent changes or recent modest increases in hospitalizations for physical abuse.^{6,7}

RISK FACTORS

Child abuse and neglect result from a complex interaction of child, caregiver, and environmental factors. Although child physical abuse and neglect affect children of all ages, ethnicities, and sociodemographic backgrounds, particular factors increase maltreatment vulnerability, and specific situations more commonly trigger maltreatment. Most often multiple factors coexist and are interrelated, increasing the risk for maltreatment of the child.⁸

Child characteristics that predispose a child to maltreatment include those that make a child more difficult to care for, or are in contrast to parental expectations. Examples include children with special health care needs, chronic illnesses, or physical or developmental disabilities.⁹ Physical aggression, resistance to parental direction, and antisocial behaviors also more commonly characterize maltreated children.¹⁰ These children exhibit poor emotional regulation, distractibility, negative affect, and a resistance to following directions.¹¹ A child born prematurely may present special needs, and early and at times prolonged separation may contribute to an increased vulnerability to maltreatment.¹² Although adolescents are more likely than younger children to suffer physical abuse and neglect, because of their smaller size and less mature developmental capacity, infants and toddlers are particularly vulnerable to severe and fatal maltreatment.¹³

Factors that decrease a parent's ability to cope with stress and, therefore, increase the potential for maltreatment include low self-esteem, poor impulse control, and substance abuse.¹⁴ Other parental characteristics associated with child maltreatment include young age, low educational achievement, and mental illness.¹⁵ In addition, parents who were themselves victims of child maltreatment are more likely to have children who are abused and neglected.¹⁶ Parents who maltreat their children are more likely to have unrealistic developmental expectations for child behavior and to have a negative perception of normal behavior. In addition, parents with punitive parenting styles are more likely to maltreat their children.¹⁶

High-stress situations can increase the potential for child abuse and neglect. Circumstances that occur during the course of normal child development, including colic,

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