

Bringing Back the Social History



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KEYWORDS

- Adverse childhood experiences • Child maltreatment • Negative attributions
- Psychosocial risk factors • Toxic stress

KEY POINTS

- The social history plays a key role in determining a child's current and future health.
- A useful social history involves asking about key elements of a child's environment, including the circumstances in which the child is being raised, adults involved in the child's life, presence of key factors associated with increased risk, and, most importantly, caregiver-child relationship and attachment.
- The social history should be obtained starting at the first well-child visit and at each visit thereafter. Children at highest risk often live in dynamic, often chaotic, environments, with frequent changes in their living situations and household compositions, increasing the importance of obtaining a social history at each visit.
- Child maltreatment (abuse or neglect) can have devastating health consequences that last for life and diminish emotional health and intellectual ability.
- Understanding each child's familial psychosocial risk and protective factors through the social history is an important link to preventing harmful parenting tactics, other threats to healthy development, and even potentially preventing child maltreatment.

WHY THE SOCIAL HISTORY MATTERS

A child's family environment is one of the most important and critical determinants of the child's health (current and future) and it is integral to the child's well-being and development.¹⁻⁴ A robust body of research has shown the role that this environment plays in brain and emotional development.^{2,3,5} These environmental influences also

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have an impact on a child's physical health and play a significant role in determining future health and disease.^{4–11} Thus, a social history not only is useful in identifying risk for child injury and maltreatment but also in identifying factors that might contribute to children's health problems. Strengthening families and supporting parents also promote children's health, development, and safety and help prevent child maltreatment.

A large body of research highlights the importance of environmental influences in the prenatal to early childhood period (ie, before age 2).^{2,3,5} Therefore, obtaining a social history focused on the important aspects of the child's family environment is a critical component of early well-child care. The social history should be obtained at every visit because the family environment is frequently changing, and it influences child development in a dynamic way. The information obtained from social histories has the potential to contribute to a lifetime of health and well-being.

THE ILL EFFECTS OF MALTREATMENT CAN LAST A LIFETIME

Adverse childhood experiences, especially child maltreatment, are linked to risk factors for ill health as adults and early death.^{6,7} Child maltreatment occurs in many forms (physical, sexual, or emotional abuse or neglect). It is not uncommon for a child to suffer from multiple forms of maltreatment at the same time.^{12,13} Maltreatment is known to confer myriad deleterious health effects, both physical and mental.^{6,7} In some instances, the effects of maltreatment are so severe that life ends in infancy or early childhood. In fact, 70% of deaths from maltreatment occur in children under 3 years of age.^{14–16}

CHILD MALTREATMENT PREVENTION BEGINS WITH PRIMARY CARE

Problems in the family environment are often contributors to child maltreatment and indicate risk for a variety of negative outcomes (discussed previously). A social history that identifies families at risk for maltreatment has the potential to identify problems before they escalate to these most serious outcomes, in addition to helping families and children function better.

This type of prevention strategy is in line with the biopsychosocial model proposed by Engel,¹⁷ which provides a broad view of child health and includes the psychosocial aspect when assessing children. This concept is well stated by Flaherty and colleagues¹¹: "A comprehensive assessment of children's health should include a careful history of their past exposure to adverse conditions and maltreatment. Interventions aimed at reducing these exposures may result in better child health."

GOALS OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY

The goal of the social history is to assess the strengths and weaknesses in a child's environment to identify aspects of family life that can be reinforced and encouraged as well as identify potential sources of harm to the child that must be addressed. A comprehensive social history may also identify opportunities for parental education regarding parental expectations and age- and health-appropriate developmental milestones. The social history provides insight into a child's environment, which includes the circumstances in which the child is being raised, a comprehensive listing of the adults involved in the child's life, disciplinary practices, presence of key factors associated with increased risk for maltreatment, and, most importantly, caregiver-child relationship and attachment.^{4,18,19} Assessing the nature of the caregiver-child relationship is important. A healthy, secure attachment between parents and children

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