

Chapter 3

Breaking the Silence: Childhood Abuse and Neglect

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ABSTRACT

Childhood abuse and neglect are tragic and distressing realities that persist in societies worldwide and can have profound and long-lasting effects on children and adolescents. It encompasses a wide range of harmful behaviours, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglectful acts of omission, such as failing to provide adequate care, supervision, or emotional support. This chapter focuses on recognising the different forms of abuse and neglect and the risk and protective factors that can be present across multiple levels of a child's ecology and interact to influence outcomes. Survivors of abuse and childhood neglect often face emotional, psychological, and physical consequences that can persist into adulthood. Addressing this global problem requires a coordinated understanding regarding the warning signs, the protective and risk factors and the impact and consequences. Evidence-based psychosocial interventions can assist children and their families to regain their functioning and facilitate the development of healthy, productive lives.

Breaking the Silence

“Childhood should be carefree, playing in the sun;

not a living nightmare in the darkness of the soul.” – Dave Pelzer

INTRODUCTION

Sneha, a 12-year-old girl, shared with her counsellor in school that her uncle had sexually abused her for several years. On sharing this with her mother, she refused to believe the incident, and it was then raised to the Juvenile Police Unit and Child Welfare Services. It was seen that her uncle was punished, and appropriate action was taken against him.

Sachin, a 6-year-old kid, had scratches and bruises on his forehead, which his teacher had noted in class. He claimed that his drunk father hit his head on a glass table because he had not cleaned his room. Sachin’s mother was called, and his dad was arrested. As needed, Sachin and his father were referred for evaluation and therapy.

Two infants, Saira and Rehna, aged seven months and one and a half years, respectively, were rescued by the police. They were rescued from a human organ trafficking racket, and after being medically and psychologically examined, they were handed over to the child protection agency.

Childhood Abuse and Neglect is a global social and public health problem with many severe short-term and long-term consequences. It is estimated that up to one billion children, between 2 to 17 years worldwide have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional neglect or violence in the past year (World Health Organisation, 2022). Childhood abuse and neglect is a universally condemned offence against children, as every day, thousands of children are exposed to sexual violence. Recognising the different forms of childhood abuse and neglect is essential for early identification and building awareness.

Children who have experienced severe abuse are frequently placed in foster care, where they may run a high risk of experiencing further long-term detrimental effects on their mental health (Zeanah & Humphreys, 2018). Almost all areas of development, including cognitive, linguistic, socio-emotional, and neurobiological development, are compromised by abuse and neglect. One of the most apparent sequelae of childhood abuse and neglect is mental health issues in children. We know that abuse significantly raises the risk of developing psychopathology. However, several internal (such as genetics and temperament) and external (such as consistent and caring carers) factors may act as protective factors and foster resilience in children who have faced severe adversity (Noll, 2021). Most cases of abuse and neglect involve young children, who need a rigorous evaluation of their caregiving contexts, which frequently involve several carers, to ensure that assessments and treatments are thorough (Flaherty et al., 2013).

Thus, various environmental factors that may support or exacerbate symptoms and impaired functioning must be addressed in the multimodal treatment of psychopathology linked to abuse and neglect in children. Mental health interventions are essential for practitioners to understand how to respond to and offer evidence-based interventions that can be effective for children and adolescents. Comprehensive

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