

Handout 2.1: Risk Factors for Child Abuse

Community Factors

There are some child-rearing practices which are abusive and public education is needed to change these. Other community factors include lack of access to social and other services, and limited access to resources to support child protection education. Communities with high levels of violence and tolerance for violence are likely to provide an environment in which child abuse is not detected or identified as such. Some communities might have religious or other cultural practices which are abusive to children.

Parent Factors

History of child abuse. Unfortunately, the patterns we learn in childhood are often what we use as parents. Without treatment and insight, sadly, the cycle of child abuse often continues. As a result, many parents abuse children thinking that this is the normal way to rear children

Poor parenting skills. Parenting can be a very time intensive, difficult job. Parents caring for children without support from family, friends or the community can be under a lot of stress. Teen parents often struggle with the maturity and patience needed to be a parent. Caring for a child with a disability, special needs or difficult behaviours is also a challenge. Caregivers who are under financial or relationship stress are at risk as well. Poor parent-child interaction, negative attitudes and attributions about a child's behaviour and inaccurate knowledge and expectations about child development are other contributing factors.

Alcohol or drug abuse. Alcohol and drug abuse lead to serious lapses in judgment. They can interfere with impulse control making emotional and physical abuse more likely. Due to impairment caused by being intoxicated, alcohol and drug abuse frequently lead to child neglect and other forms of abuse.

Domestic violence. Witnessing domestic violence in the home as well as the chaos and instability that is likely to result is emotional abuse to a child. Frequently domestic violence will escalate to physical violence against the child as well.¹

Poverty and neglect.

Poverty means the lack of access to resources and in many cases, parents and caregivers who live in poverty go to all lengths to ensure that their children's needs are met. When considering issues of neglect, we should consider whether the parents and caregivers have made any effort to access the resources to ensure that the child's needs are met.

Corporal punishment and discipline. The beating of children as a form of discipline has been accepted in Guyana. There have been some severe cases of injuries, both physically and emotionally to the children. Some points to remember about discipline are:-

DISCIPLINE helps a child learn a lesson that will carry over and positively affect future behaviour. ABUSE affects the future in a negative way, leading to anger, hatred and more deviant behaviour.

DISCIPLINE enhances the child's sense of self-worth, helping the child learn self-control and thus becoming comfortable within the family and in society. ABUSE robs the child of self-worth and causes him/her to feel like an outcast and resentful.

¹ Modified from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/child_abuse_physical_emotional_sexual_neglect.htm

DISCIPLINE is not shame or guilt. ABUSE is shame or guilt which satisfies the needs of the parents at the moment and destroys the self image of the child in a hostile manner.

DISCIPLINE is taught by example. But so is abuse!

Factors which increase children's vulnerability to abuse

Age of children

The rate of documented maltreatment is highest for children between birth and 3 years of age. It declines as age increases.

Infants and young children, due to their small physical size, early developmental status, and need for constant care, can be particularly vulnerable to certain forms of maltreatment, such as Shaken Baby Syndrome and physical neglect.²

Children and adolescents with disabilities:

Children with physical, cognitive, and emotional disabilities are 1.7 times more likely to be maltreated than children without disabilities.

Children who are perceived by their parents as "different" or those with special needs, chronic illnesses, or difficult temperaments may be at greater risk of maltreatment. The demands of caring for these children may overwhelm their parents. Disruptions may occur in bonding or attachment processes, particularly if children are unresponsive to affection or separated from parents by frequent hospitalizations.³

In addition to the common risk factors for all children and adolescents, those with disabilities are vulnerable because they:

- May have developmental or communication difficulties that make disclosure of abuse difficult or impossible
- May lack correct information or education about abuse prevention, sexuality, and self-protection strategies (e.g., the right to say "no")
- May not understand the difference between a hygienic touch, an affectionate touch, or an abusive touch
- May have physical disabilities that prevent them from defending themselves or getting away
- May depend on others to meet even their most basic needs (bathing, toileting, feeding) which creates an extreme imbalance of power
- May have a desire to please or may have cognitive difficulties that make them overly trusting and easier to trick⁴

² <http://www.childwelfare.gov>

³ <http://www.childwelfare.gov>

⁴ <http://childabusemd.com/disabilities/risk-factors.shtml>