

Article 7: Human Development and Poor Parenting

Poor parenting—often marked by **child neglect** (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Simon et al., 2024), **parental physical abuse** (Letkiewicz et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2003), and **parental emotional maltreatment** (Hibbard et al., 2012; Taillieu et al., 2016)—can have a long-lasting impact on human development. Hence, the following studies provide further insight on this phenomenon.

Human Development and Child Neglect

Neglect in the context of poor parenting is often defined as parents' failure to meet a child's basic and emotional needs, including housing, food, clothing, education, access to health care, and proper validation of emotions (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). Following that lead, several studies have looked into the effects of child neglect on human development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; Simon et al., 2024).

For instance, a report from the CDC (2024) indicated that child neglect can have a long-term impact on individuals' health, opportunity, and well-being. Statistics revealed that one in seven children experienced some form of neglect in the United States throughout 2023-2024. Moreover, 1,820 U.S. children died of abuse or neglect in 2021. It is important to note that these numbers are likely underestimated because many cases go unreported.

On that account, children who are neglected may also experience emotional or psychological distress leading to anxiety and posttraumatic stress. Over the long term, they are also more likely to become victims or perpetrators of violence and suffer from substance abuse, STDs, delayed brain development, low educational attainment, and limited employment opportunities. Issues with brain development in particular often result in posttraumatic stress disorders and difficulties with learning, attention, and memory (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024).

Another study provided an overview of existing evidence on childhood neglect and its association with emotional regulation in adulthood. Thus, researchers implemented a systematic approach involving the analysis of 25 studies to identify recurrent findings and knowledge gaps (Simon et al., 2024).

The study revealed the following insights:

- Child neglect led to neurological and psychological problems in many cases.
- Neglected children often exhibited underdeveloped areas of the brain responsible for cognitive and emotional management.
- Child neglect fueled emotional issues, such as low self-confidence and negative self-image. Additionally, it contributed to the development of psychological disorders such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety disorders.
- Overall, long-term consequences of child neglect, spanning from adolescence to adulthood, led to a wide range of psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety,

personality disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and (although less extensively studied) emotion regulation (Simon et al., 2024).

Human Development and Parental Physical Abuse

Research has often explored the profound and multifaceted ways in which parental physical abuse impacts human development. Overall, studies have found that children exposed to physical trauma inflicted by their parents face a heightened risk of various adverse outcomes, including cognitive impairments, mental health issues, academic difficulties, and engagement in risky behaviors (Letkiewicz et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2003).

For instance, a study looked at the negative impact of child maltreatment (including physical abuse) on brain structure and cognitive functions. Thus, researchers conducted a systematic review of existing neuroimaging studies to assess the impact of childhood maltreatment on areas of the brain involved in emotion regulation, cognitive control, and stress response. Results showed that childhood physical abuse was associated with deficits in executive functions like attention, memory, working memory, response inhibition, fear regulation, and emotional discrimination. Furthermore, these negative outcomes persisted in adulthood, often increasing the risk for mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and emotional dysregulation. Overall, cognitive problems in this context often led to poor concentration, working memory issues, and lower problem-solving abilities later in life (Letkiewicz et al., 2021).

On that same note, a study aimed to understand how experiences of childhood abuse—including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse—are associated with functional impairments in adulthood. Hence, researchers conducted a cross-sectional study that included a sample of 792 adults attending primary care clinics affiliated with the UCLA Medical Center, or similar affiliated clinics. Data was collected via self-reported questionnaires about childhood abuse experiences in all categories and current health status. Moreover, statistical methods were used to examine associations between reported childhood abuse and adult health outcomes, controlling for potential confounding factors (Springer et al., 2003).

Findings revealed that adults who experienced childhood physical abuse had more functional impairments in adulthood, including increased days spent bedridden due to illness. Physical abuse was also linked to higher rates of chronic health problems, such as gastrointestinal issues and other somatic complaints. Overall, the study found that physical abuse contributed independently to worse health outcomes, even when controlling for other types of abuse. Hence, researchers addressed the need for healthcare systems to acknowledge this problem and emphasized the importance of early intervention and prevention strategies to reduce these adverse outcomes through the lifespan (Springer et al., 2003).

Human Development and Parental Emotional Maltreatment

Parental emotional maltreatment—also referred to as psychological maltreatment—involves a wide range of behaviors that can undermine a child’s emotional development and well-being in several ways (Hibbard et al., 2012). While it may not leave visible signs of mistreatment as physical abuse, its negative effects can have deep and long-lasting outcomes (Hibbard et al., 2012; Taillieu et al., 2016).

For instance, a study looked at existing evidence on the relationship between parental emotional maltreatment and children's development. Following that lead, researchers conducted a narrative review that outlines academic consensus on how poor parenting in this context can lead to negative outcomes in children's health and development. Particularly, behavioral patterns linked to parental emotional maltreatment were classified into six core types aligned with the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC). Those were: spurning (verbal rejection or degradation), terrorizing, isolating, exploiting or corrupting, denying emotional responsiveness (emotional neglect), and showing maltreatment in other areas of development (hence, mental, physical, and educational maltreatment) (Hibbard et al., 2012).

Results showed the following insights:

- Emotional maltreatment was often underscored but highly damaging. In fact, this form of abuse was shown to be as harmful—or sometimes more harmful—than physical or sexual abuse.
- Children exposed to emotional maltreatment often exhibited low self-esteem, attachment styles founded on uncertainty, social withdrawal or aggression, poor peer relationships, and delayed cognitive skills.
- These negative outcomes often persisted into adolescence and adulthood, contributing to impaired relationships, reduced academic and professional achievement, higher risk of revictimization or becoming perpetrators of abuse, and intergenerational cycles of trauma and dysfunction.

Hence, the researchers argued that psychological maltreatment should be treated with the same seriousness as physical or sexual abuse in order to prevent its negative effects on development (Hibbard et al., 2012).

Another study looked at the association between childhood emotional maltreatment and subsequent mental health outcomes. The forms of emotional maltreatment examined were emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and both emotional abuse and neglect in connection to family history of dysfunction. and lifetime diagnoses of several mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and personality disorders, among other clinical conditions. Thus, researchers computed a statistical analysis of existing data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), which contained psychiatric diagnoses and childhood maltreatment history of 34,000 U.S. adults aged 18 or older (Taillieu et al., 2016).

Results indicated that the most prevalent form of emotional maltreatment was emotional neglect only (6.2%), followed by emotional abuse only (4.8%), and then both emotional abuse and neglect combined (3.1%). Furthermore, emotional abuse and emotional neglect were significantly associated with mood disorders, anxiety disorders, substance use disorders, and personality disorders. Ultimately, emotional abuse and neglect were as predictive—or even more predictive—of mental illness than physical or sexual abuse in some cases. Additionally, cumulative exposure to emotional maltreatment (i.e., repeated or chronic experiences) increased the likelihood and severity of psychiatric outcomes (Taillieu et al., 2016).



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The study called for greater awareness, recognition, and prevention of emotional abuse and neglect, both in clinical settings and public health policy.

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