

Violence & Trauma in Childhood

A GROWING GLOBAL CRISIS

Violence Against Children Around the World Has Reached New Extremes

More than a billion children are exposed to violence each year. In Honduras, young people live in neighborhoods torn apart by gang violence. In India, girls are sold to cotton farmers as laborers. And in Mozambique, children are homeless as a result of devastating cyclones. Before they reach age 16, nearly one in every four children around the world will experience a traumatic event that “threatens or causes harm to his or her emotional and physical well-being.” Without intervention, children that experience- or witness- abuse, exploitation, neglect, and violence are irreversibly changed. Adverse childhood experiences can cause significant and lasting damage to the psychological, biological and emotional health of young people.

“Childhood trauma reshapes how the body responds to stress long-term, across a lifetime.”

Dr. Kerry Ressler
Chief Scientific Officer
McLean Hospital

Adversity Damages Young Brains

When a child experiences stress, the brain releases cortisol and adrenaline. As part of the “fight or flight” response, these hormones redirect energy from the body’s routine functions to those needed to confront a threat or find safety. This physiological process impedes neural development, alters the immune system and obstructs physical growth. It suppresses functions of the reproductive system and changes pathways in the brain that regulate mood, motivation, and fear. If stress is relieved, as when a child receives comfort and support from a trusted adult, the body’s stress system returns to normal.

If stress persists however, prolonged activation of the stress response system can cause irreversible damage. This “wear and tear” effect on multiple organ systems influences a child’s ability to learn and thus to gain new skills and to engage in meaningful civic and economic participation. Beyond cognitive problems, a child whose brain is exposed to sustained elevated levels of cortisol and adrenaline will also be atypically prone to health issues such as heart disease, depression and cancer. Further, he or she may struggle with self-regulation or seek out relationships that follow familiar patterns of abuse or neglect.

New Evidence Shows Stress is Intergenerational

Each person’s genetic makeup is permanent. But new research in the area of epigenetics shows that life experiences- everything from diet to schooling- can determine how genes are expressed. See *text box 1* Over time, chemical “tags” are added to and removed from our DNA, turning genes on or off. Further still, a growing body of evidence indicates that these “tags” can be hereditary,

Consequences of Childhood Adversity

Adverse experiences prolong brain exposure to cortisol and adrenaline.



psychological
related to /the mind
/behavior

lowered capacity to regulate decisions and actions
changes in mood, motivation and fear
higher incidence of mental illness



biological
related to /the human body

weakened immune and other body systems
higher incidence of disease
lowered capacity to learn



social-emotional
related to /relationships
/emotions

seek abusive relationships as victim or perpetrator
less likely to engage in community activities
less civic participation

including those associated with traumatic stress. As such, the impacts of trauma influence the well-being and potential of survivors and generations to come.

People & Communities Can Build a Child's Resilience to Adversity

Despite expanding evidence of the deep influence of trauma, utilizing stress reduction strategies and creating positive environments, children can overcome adversity. Protective physiological factors- such as neuroplasticity, the flexibility of the young brain- as well as contextual and environmental factors- such as the presence of a caring adult in a child's life- support the development of a child's ability to adapt to difficult situations.

Take, for example, a town plagued by violent conflict between local groups. Families here would experience significant trauma. If the community were to undertake a traditional reconciliation process, children and youth could come to understand that dialogue diminishes the pain of loss. We can shape the "behaviors, thoughts and actions" that build much-needed resilience in children.

I mplementation and enforcement of laws
Norms and values
Safe environments
Parent and caregiver support
Income and economic strengthening
Response and support services
Education and life skills

World Health
Organization

text box 2

Epigenetics

Epigenetics refers to the process through which chemical compounds are added to single genes, affecting genetic activity without changing the DNA sequence. New evidence in epigenetics indicates that the impacts of adverse childhood experiences do not end with the survivor, instead are passed onto future generations.

Mayo Clinic

text box 1

Multilateral Agencies Are Cooperating to End Violence Against Children

International institutions are working together to further a shared understanding of this complex problem. Led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, innovative research- using Violence Against Children Surveys- maps the magnitude, nature, and consequences of violence against children. A coalition led by the World Health Organization recently agreed upon evidence-based strategies to end violence against children, better known by its acronym, INSPIRE. See *text box 2* Action to curtail the influence of trauma and adversity cannot wait.

The US Government Must Lead in Policy and Practice

The United States is uniquely positioned to drive efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children. Federal government agencies like the US Agency for International Development, the State Department, the Department of Labor and others are hard at work serving the world's children. However, systemic gaps remain, most notably in inter-agency coordination and the definition of common metrics.

Introduced in March 2019, House Resolution 230 and Senate Resolution 112 condemn all forms of violence against children and youth globally and outline measures to better align activities. Passage of these resolutions would demonstrate America's unwavering commitment to family. In today's changing geopolitical landscape, the health and well-being of children around the world is important common ground.

Sources

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Mayo Clinic, the Peak Counseling Group, Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, British Broadcasting Channel, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Association, World Health Organization, Ending Violence Against Children