

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 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

Violence 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 and changes pathways in the brain that regulate mood, motivation and fear. It also alters the immune system, suppresses functions of the reproductive system and obstructs physical growth. 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 Traumatic & Chronic 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” may be hereditary, including those associated with traumatic stress. As such, the repercussions of trauma are felt by survivors and their families for generations to come.

Text Box 1

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 and are instead passed onto future generations.

Mayo Clinic

People & Communities Can Build Children’s Resilience to Violence

Despite expanding evidence of the deep influence of trauma, stress reduction strategies and positive environments can help children to overcome adversity. Protective physiological factors-

such as the neuroplasticity, or 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, following a return to peace, 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.

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. Similarly, a coalition led by the World Health Organization recently agreed upon evidence-based strategies to stop childhood trauma, better known by the acronym, INSPIRE. (See Text Box 2) Action to curtail the influence of violence and adversity cannot wait.

The US Government Must Lead in Policy & 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.

Text Box 2

- I**mplementation and enforcement of laws
- N**orms and values
- S**afe environments
- P**arent and caregiver support
- I**ncome and economic strengthening
- R**esponse and support services
- E**ducation and life skills

World Health Organization

Consequences of Childhood Adversity

Adverse experiences prolong brain exposure to cortisol and adrenaline.

psychological
related to the mind
behavior



lowered capacity to make decisions
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



more likely to seek abusive relationships
decreased community participation

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 Company, the American Psychological Association, World Health Organization, End Violence Against Children Coalition