

Child Maltreatment Risk Factors

Risk factors are the individual and environmental factors that increase the likelihood of a child becoming victimized by child maltreatment. Children are never responsible for the harm inflicted upon them. However, certain characteristics have a higher tendency to be present when there is an occurrence of child abuse and neglect.

Child characteristics:

- Young age: The majority of children who experience child maltreatment are less than four years old. Within this preschool and underage group, the majority of those who are victims of child maltreatment are one year or less.
- Having special needs: Developmental disability, premature birth, mental health issues, intellectual disability, chronic physical health issues.

Parental characteristics:

- Lack of knowledge and understanding of typical development.
- History of being abused as a child.
- Substance abuse problems.
- Mental illness, including depression.
- Lack of social support.
- Unrelated, transient partners in home (e.g. mother's boyfriend who is not the father to children).
- Young age, low education, single parenthood, poverty, large number of dependent children.
- Thoughts or emotions that support or justify child maltreatment, examples include the belief that the child is misbehaving intentionally or is out to get the parent, or belief in the value of extreme corporal punishment.

Family Factors:

- Family is socially isolated.
- Family is experiencing domestic abuse. (Even if the children are not also being physically abused, such behavior has an extremely negative emotional impact upon them as well).
- Unemployment.
- Homelessness.
- Disorganization or the failure to ensure the safety or basic needs of dependent children.
- Emotional climate such as parenting stress, poor parent-child relations or negative interactions between parent and child.

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Community Characteristics:

- High violence and crime.
- Poverty.
- Unemployment.
- Insecure housing.
- Lack of recreational resources (parks, sidewalks, safe child and family activities).
- Poor access to affordable food, medical care, health insurance, adequate childcare, social services.
- Lack of social capital among neighbors and community members.

Societal and Cultural factors:

- Lack of policy and resources to support fragile families.
- Lack of emphasis on the well-being and rights of children.
- Exposure to racism or discrimination.
- Social Disapproval.
- Punitive versus rehabilitative focus.

*This is not an exhaustive list.