

Influence of Childhood Abuse on Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Currently, child maltreatment remains to be a major health as well as social welfare problem across the world. In India, thousands and thousands of children, from all kinds of socioeconomic backgrounds, different ages, religions and cultures are victims of childhood abuse and every single day, millions more at an increasing risk. It has been established through multiple researches that exposure to any form of childhood abuse or maltreatment negatively affects the present and future academic performance, along with the emotional and psychological well-being of a child. The purpose of this paper is to provide a literature synthesis of how child maltreatment impacts the educational and mental health of children and also a small discussion on how teachers and professionals play a huge role in this respect.

Keywords: *child abuse, maltreatment, achievement, education, mental health, child welfare.*

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines *child maltreatment* as "all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Thus, child maltreatment refers to any kind of physical, psychological and/or sexual mistreatment or neglect of a child by their caregivers or parents. This also includes a failure to act or an act which may result in the potential or actual harm of a child and can occur in multiple instances, for example, the child's own home, organisations, their schools or any communities the child interacts with. Researchers mainly use it as an umbrella term to cover the concepts of exploitation, neglect and trafficking.

This issue goes back in time as late as the 19th century. In 1860, a French forensic medical expert, named Auguste Tardieu gathered together a few cases of child maltreatment, in which 18 of the cases turned out to be fatal. The reasons included death of children by starvation and/or recurrent physical abuse. He also observed during home visits that the sadness and fear on the faces of these children disappeared as soon as they were put in protection.

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In case of India, violence against children is very widespread and unfortunately is a harsh reality for millions of socio-economic groups. And this violence is not only subjected to any one gender, both girls and boys face early forms of domestic abuse, sexual abuse, violence at home and in school, trafficking, child labour and bullying.

Coming to the topic of educational achievements, there are a number of factors which affect the outcomes of academics. This ranges from age, socioeconomic backgrounds, physical needs, diet to mental health, motivation, attention, level of interest, etc. These factors have both negative and positive effects on a child's academic achievement.

There is a direct link between academic performance and childhood trauma (resulting from childhood abuse and maltreatment). Children who are exposed to trauma actively run the risk of suffering from long term negative effects like mental illness such as depression and anxiety etc. Academics, overall performance, school attendance and intelligence are affected by the exposure to trauma. This trauma exposure includes both witnessing and/or being engaged in one or more types of traumatic experiences. One of the long-term negative effects can lead to symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

These symptoms are similar to the symptoms of people who attended residential or boarding schools, for example, as residential school survivors continue to experience negative long-term effects from their experiences. It's also seen that children who have experienced trauma often view the world and themselves differently, due to their inability to make sense of their own experiences. (Kuban & Steele, 2011). Their rational thinking as well as their emotional well-being is affected.

PHYSICAL ABUSE

Physical child abuse refers to an intentional act of causing injury, bodily harm, trauma or other form of physical suffering to a child by either their caretaker, parents, or an elder. It can be carried out by beating, hitting, slapping, choking, pinching, hair pulling, burning with cigarettes, or any type of severe physical punishment. Physical punishment is different from physical abuse because it refers to the use of physical force with an intent of inflicting bodily pain, but not necessarily injury, for the purpose of correcting the child or controlling them. A study by Elarousy and Shaqiqi (2017) revealed that the most common form of physical abuse among 200 female students in Jeddah was biting (15%), followed by spanking or pinching (13.5%). Hitting, slapping or punching by parents, which practically caused no injury were reported at 13.5% for rarest and 12.5% for usually. Furthermore, pulling of hair was experienced by 13% of the participants rarely and usually by 4.5% of the students. And lastly hitting with hard objects was reported rarely by 11.5% of them and 3% for usually.

SEXUAL ABUSE

This refers to any sexual act between an adult and a child, including penetration, incest, sodomy, oral sex, rape, fondling, commercial exploitation (child prostitution or child pornography), and violations of bodily privacy. It can be carried out by parents, siblings, relatives, babysitters, foster parents, neighbours, strangers, teachers, trainers, childcare professionals etc. Some signs of a child who has been or is being sexually abused is by observing that they have age-inappropriate interest or knowledge in sexual acts, fear of a family member or a specific person, seductiveness, over compliance or excessive aggression.

EMOTIONAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

It's also known as verbal abuse, mental abuse, and psychological maltreatment. It refers to any attitude, behaviour, act or a failure to act in a way that interferes with a child's mental well-being/ health, which can in turn hinder their social development. It tends to have longer negative effects than other forms of abuse like physical or sexual abuse. Emotional abuse has also almost always been found when other type of abuse is present, which can come from other children (bullies) or parents and adults.

PARENTAL NEGLECT

This is the most common type of child maltreatment, more prevalent than child physical abuse or sexual abuse. It refers to failing to provide or a child's basic physical as well as emotional needs by their parents, caretakers or guardians. There is an overlap between emotional abuse and emotional neglect but the difference is that a neglect includes a repeated pattern. It is also very hard to identify victims, because neglect refers to an act of omission, not doing a certain thing. There are different types of neglect: Physical Neglect can include a failure to provide clothing, food, shelter, basic hygiene, medical care, a shelter etc. Educational Neglect refers to failure to enroll a child in an educational institution, excessive absences from school, not providing necessary special education if needed. Lastly, Emotional Neglect refers to a failure to provide emotional and psychological support, as needed. Not providing a child with support, love or affection.

CHILD MALTREATMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH

Child abuse or neglect affects an individual's physical as well as mental well-being in direct or indirect ways. It has been linked with a plethora of psychiatric, psychological, somatic and medical symptoms including anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, PTSD etc. It has been seen that any form of abuse or neglect during infancy or childhood results negatively in the early stages of brain development, leading to future negative behavioural outcomes in adolescents and adulthood. Child maltreatment impairs a child's mental health, and impairments in mental well-being can include anxiety, low mood, deficits in social skills, poor interpersonal relationships etc. There is overwhelming evidence of research pointing towards the short- and long-term negative impact of a child's mental health and well-being across a range of behavioural and emotional domains. (English et al., 2005; Veltman & Browne, 2001; Haskett, Nears, Ward, & McPherson, 2006).

Maltreated children who have experienced certain forms of physical and/or emotional abuse tend to perceive greater threat, hostility, danger or aggression when they interact with others (Cicchetti & Valentino; 2006; Hamby & Grych, 2013). This may have served them well in the context of their abusive caregiving environment, but it seriously interferes with their normal behavioural and emotional functioning in other contexts. They have a tendency of not trusting others due to potential harm or threat. These perceptions are often carried forth in their peer interactions and is often exhibited through forms of interpersonal behaviours, such as avoidance, aggression and hostility; which makes it difficult for these children to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships. (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2010; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001).

Adults who have faced childhood trauma have higher risks of engaging in risky health behaviours like smoking, drug abuse, unsafe sex and have an overall lower health status. Childhood maltreatment is positively related to adult aggression, depression, hostility, anxiety disorders, and personality disorders. Women with a history of child sexual abuse

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have a greater prevalence of obsessive-compulsive disorder, agoraphobia, PTSD, sexual disorders and suicide attempts compared to women without such history of abuse.

We can see that physical abuse, and even corporal punishment have a direct impact in reduction of cognitive development and academic performance of children. It is important to study both the effects of abusive and non-abusive forms of physical punishments, as reported by both children or parents and caregivers. Children face significant fear or distress even if a physical punishment doesn't lead to a physical injury. This distress has been found to negatively affect the brain development, structure and overall well-being.

Mild physical punishments carried out by parents have a huge chance of developing into physical abuse and even these mild punishments have consequences on a child's cognitive and social functioning (especially in school).

MALTREATMENT, MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

A child's educational outcome is dependent on both academic achievement and mental well-being. A sound mental health ensures academic achievement. And a sound mental health includes emotional, psychological and behavioural well-being. As we have established in the previous paragraphs that a maltreated child's mental well-being is impaired, which also implies the fact that this impairment impacts their academic performance directly or indirectly.

Children who have been through traumatic experiences tend to have deficits in their social skills, poor interpersonal relationships, anxiety and mood disorders, aggressive behaviour etc. which hamper their academic achievements.

Exposure to trauma can "impact behaviour, learning, social, emotional and psychological functioning" (Kuban & Steele, 2011). According to the Hierarchy of Needs given by Abraham Maslow, children whose physical needs are not met, such as the need for safety, they struggle to achieve their full potential (Duplechain et al., 2008). The children whose main focus is on their sense of safety, physiological needs, and emotional needs will obviously have a hard time concentrating in school. These children tend to have "attention problems, lower cognitive functioning, behavioural problems, decreased school attendance, grade repetitions and achievement problems" including lower reading achievement. Thus, exposure to trauma can lead to increased delinquent and aggressive behaviours and also an impairment in school functioning (Jaycox et al., 2009). Now if we were to talk about their academic achievements, children who have faced trauma have "poorer school performance, decreased I.Q and reading ability, as mentioned above, lower GPAs, and high levels of school absences". (Kuban & Steele, 2011). It has also been found by researchers that students who have been exposed to trauma have behaviours characterised by an inability to concentrate, verbal blow-ups, frequent absences, passivity and "spacing out" (Sitler, 2009, p.120).

Duplechain et al. (2008) found that exposure to violence especially has a negative effect on students' reading abilities. This is due to the reason that children are unable to focus on their studies or school work when they do not feel safe and because of that they are anxious, fearful and more focused on suppressing their traumatic memories. But it was also found that students who have moderate exposure to traumatic events had lower reading capabilities than students who have high exposure to trauma. (Duplechain et al. 2008). This was attributed to the fact that educators recognise students with high exposure to trauma much more easily than students with moderate exposure to trauma as the student with high

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exposure also have other difficulties which are more prominent, for example, lower grades, low attendance, grade repeats etc. When it is recognised a child is overtly experiencing trauma, educators may identify the problems and help the students accordingly and help them improve. On the other hand, children who have had moderate exposure to trauma may not overtly express their needs, thus leading to educators paying less attention to their needs, eventually leading to a more negative affect of their reading abilities.

In research conducted by Elarousy and Shaqiqi (2017) on the effect of physical abuse on academic achievement among secondary school female students in Jeddah, the most important finding was that two thirds of the participants who reported physical abuse turned out to have a GPA less than 85% compared with about one third of the participants who have never been abused. The results were statistically significant. It was also found that 29% of the participants reported that they have been physically abused.

Due to an increase of reports of child abuse, there has been a growing amount of research into the consequences of childhood maltreatment. It has chances to lead to immediate as well as lifelong physical and mental health impairment. Poor school performance and low achievement are part of the long-term effects of abuse. The stress caused by maltreatment is associated with disruption in early brain development and extreme levels of stress can impair the development and functioning of the immune and nervous systems. Due to this, adults who have a history of maltreatment are at an increased risk for physical, mental and behavioural health problems.

Role of Educators and Professionals

Children who have experienced trauma and abuse most of the time face difficulties with their educational settings which can affect both their mental state and their academic performance. The impairment in school functioning due to abuse is a very complex and dynamic process which involves the disruption of key development processes (Romano et al., 2014).

In a study done by Ngisa et al (2017) it was found that most teachers were not aware of the child abuse faced by the pupils. Most pupils did not report child abuse since majority indicated that nothing was done even after reporting. Most of them have not been taught about child abuse and the few those who had been taught received information from the media, church, friends and the school. It was found that the level of awareness a child has about their abuse or maltreatment can impact or influence their academic achievements.

There are a number of individuals who play a complementary as well as primary role in the promotion of educational achievement and success to children who have been maltreated. This can range from a child's biological parents, caregivers, guardians, foster parents to professional caregivers, school members etc. These individuals have to work in a coordinated manner, monitor behaviours, make regular observations and devise an appropriate plan to ensure the academic success of maltreated children. The mental health needs have to be prioritised in cases like this so as to create and ensure a positive culture of expectations in the context of academics because it directly influences the motivation and attitudes of these children. One of the aspects of the culture can simply imply continued engagement in the child's academic outcomes. (Berridge, 2012).

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An important consideration to make certain that maltreated children can succeed in academics, is to warrant that professionals or organisations are truly committed to the efforts and aim to create trauma-sensitive school environments. (Romano et al, 2014).

CONCLUSION

Child maltreatment has actively been becoming more and more prevalent in our society and has reached an alarming state. Experience of childhood trauma and abuse creates a domino effect on a child's normal development, which in turn affects their school functioning and socialising capabilities, consequently impacting their holistic development (includes brain development, cognitive development, interpersonal skills, span of attention, concentration levels etc.).

This calls for more research in this field and the need for action by organisations and institutions. If this is not made sure then kids who are being maltreated won't come up and report their trauma. In most cases, abusive acts go unreported due to -

- Lack of education and awareness on the topic
- Fear of elder caregivers
- Fear of not getting protection
- They feel that there is no use in reporting because no action will be taken afterwards

In a few researches it was also found that children were not even aware they were being abused due to their lack of knowledge on it. It is also very normalised in most Asian households (especially Indian) for parents to constantly physically and emotionally abuse their children.

There is a need to make investments in efforts to understand the importance of educational success needed for maltreated children and to ensure that all the stakeholders contribute in making this goal possible. (Romano et al., 2014).

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Conflict of Interest

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