

Childhood Maltreatment: Impact on Substance Dependency and Aggressive Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Childhood maltreatment is a pervasive issue with profound implications for developmental outcomes, including increased vulnerability to substance dependency and aggressive behaviors in adulthood. This review synthesizes current literature of 2019 to 2024 located by searching databases like Science direct, PubMed, and Google Scholar to explore the impact of childhood maltreatment on substance dependency and aggressive behavior. Studies consistently demonstrate that individuals exposed to maltreatment during childhood are at heightened risk for developing substance use disorders, often using substances as a coping mechanism for trauma-related distress. Moreover, studies showed that childhood maltreatment significantly increases the likelihood of exhibiting aggressive tendencies, including violence, bullying, and intimate partner aggression. Studies also reveal that mechanisms such as hostile cognition, low self-control, and callous-unemotional traits mediate these variables.

Keywords: *Childhood, Maltreatment, Substance dependency, Aggression*

Childhood maltreatment is alarmingly common and has profound long-term effects. It significantly increases the risk of substance abuse, as victims often use drugs or alcohol to cope with their trauma. Moreover, such maltreatment is linked to aggressive tendencies and psychopathic behaviors, characterized by impulsivity, lack of empathy, and increased aggression. These outcomes show immediate need for intervention plans and comprehensive systems to lit these effects. The majority of studies on trauma and addiction concentrate on interpersonal traumas, including childhood abuse, sexual violence, and domestic abuse. These studies consistently show strong links between these traumatic experiences and substance abuse, highlighting the detrimental effects of interpersonal trauma.

Maltreated children may be more prone to developing mental health issues due to their exposure to abuse and neglect. Alternatively, their elevated risk could stem from genetic and environmental factors that contribute to mental health problems, complicating previously observed associations. For instance, research indicates that children who have experienced maltreatment often have a family history of mental illness and face additional environmental

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risks such as substance dependency and aggressive behavior. However, many past studies on maltreatment and mental health, which primarily used traditional epidemiological methods like multiple regression, have not fully addressed these co-occurring risk factors or accounted for genetic influences and other unmeasured confounders.

The Risk of Substance Abuse

Childhood maltreatment can be one of the reasons for developing substance use disorders later in life which has already been studied. This relationship appears to be widespread: childhood maltreatment, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and exploitation, is linked to a higher risk and severity of substance dependency. Additionally, individuals who report multiple childhood adversities have higher rates of substance use before age 14 and greater incidence of substance dependency in adulthood. Mechanisms of the brain also explain how childhood maltreatment may lead to substance dependency. However, two major challenges complicate the interpretation of this association.

Firstly, the link between childhood maltreatment and substance use is often based on retrospective self-reports, which are prone to various errors, including recall and selection bias, intentional false reporting, and denial of previous abuse. Retrospective self-reports of childhood maltreatment show weak associations with assessed outcomes of life compared to prospectively measures. This discrepancy is crucial, as demonstrated by a study that assessed the relationship between childhood maltreatment and substance dependency using prospectively recorded court data. This study found no increased risk of substance dependency associated with childhood maltreatment, while retrospective self-reports in the same population indicated a significantly elevated risk.

Secondly, even when childhood maltreatment is recorded in prospective and objective terms, the links of childhood maltreatment & its effects are related to familial confounding. Familial confounding refers to the influence which is a combination of shared genetic and environmental factors among family members. For example, a strong statistical association between childhood maltreatment and violent behavior, known as the "cycle of violence," has been largely attributed to familial confounding in genetically informative analyses. Interpreting the association between childhood maltreatment and substance dependency requires controlling for familial confounding. Substance dependency has significant heritability, and genetic vulnerability for substance dependency overlaps with externalizing disorders, such as antisocial personality disorder, which can increase the likelihood of perpetrating childhood maltreatment. Children of parents with substance use disorders have reported rates of childhood sexual and physical abuse that are twice as high, with even higher rates if both parents have substance use disorders. Environmental factors contributing to familial confounding are equally important. For instance, the relationship between childhood maltreatment and alcohol misuse has been attributed to environment related factors shared by twin pairs. Lastly, while genetic and environmental risk factors are often viewed as separate, there is considerable genetic influence on environmental measures.

The Aggressive Tendencies

While the relationship between childhood maltreatment and aggressive tendencies has been examined, it remains complex and not well understood. Research findings are inconsistent, and not all studies have found evidence supporting this connection. These discrepancies are often attributed to methodological differences across studies. The main conclusion that childhood maltreatment significantly increases the risk of violence or aggressive behavior later in life, nearly doubling the likelihood of violent outcomes, reinforces previous research

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by providing a quantifiable estimate and its associated uncertainty. In a study involving male juvenile delinquents in China, it was discovered that links between childhood maltreatment & adolescent anger is explored by callous-unemotional traits and self-control. These findings provide insights into the development of aggression among male juvenile delinquents. The research suggests potential strategies for preventing the escalation of aggressive tendencies. Specifically, if childhood maltreatment contributes to higher levels of aggression, intervening in such maltreatment could be a viable method to curb the development of severe aggression.

A study investigated intergenerational connections in the level of physical abuse that mother & father suffered in their early years of life and the physical abuse inflicted on their own children. The study also explored whether parents' delinquent or criminal behavior and substance use served as mediating factors in these intergenerational associations. A notable strength of this research is the recognition of various types of maltreatment experienced by parents and the use of Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to distinguish those who did not have a maltreatment history from those who had experienced moderate to severe maltreatment. The findings revealed that some of the parents endured physical abuse and violence during early years of childhood. In contrast, fewer than one fifth of the parents, both mothers and fathers, reported not having experienced any physical maltreatment in their childhood. This low proportion might indicate that physical abuse was less prevalent when these parents were children.

This paper aims to understand the effects of childhood adversities on substance dependency and aggressive tendencies, providing an overview of the literature of the past 5 years that have studied the impact of childhood maltreatment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Moore et al. (2020) investigated the links between maltreatment in childhood and aggressive behavior in college students, as well as the effects on various college outcomes. The findings highlighted significant differences between groups in terms of aggression and both social and personal-emotional adjustment to college. Specifically, the severity of CM was found to be significantly associated with heightened aggression, lower GPA, and poorer personal-emotional adjustment. Aggression showed an inverse relationship with multiple aspects of college adaptation, suggesting that higher levels of aggression negatively impact a student's ability to adjust to college life.

Kisely et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between reported and substantiated childhood maltreatment and the prevalence of substance use disorders (SUD) and alcohol use disorders (AUD) in early adulthood, specifically at age 30. Adjusted analyses revealed significant associations between both recent AUD and lifetime SUD with childhood maltreatment. Further exploration by subtype indicated that recent AUD at age 30 was notably linked with experiences of abuse specifically of emotion and physical relatedness, when substance dependency had more positive relation with instances of sexual abuse. Participants who experienced recurrent or multiple forms of abuse exhibited the most adverse outcomes.

De Waal et al. (2022) aimed to explore the connection between childhood maltreatment and problematic alcohol use in adulthood across six ethnic groups within a large, urban sample in the Netherlands. The results indicated that ethnicity played a significant role in modifying these effects. Stronger links between childhood abuse and consumption of alcohol was

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observed. Notably, the Moroccan origin group showed links of four different types of childhood maltreatment and misuse of alcohol.

Li et al. (2022) investigated whether callous-unemotional traits served as mediators in the relationship between childhood maltreatment and two types of aggression, and whether these mediating effects were influenced by the quality of friendships. The findings revealed that childhood maltreatment was significantly linked to both proactive and reactive aggression, with callous-unemotional traits partially mediating these relationships after adjusting for demographic factors. Additionally, quality of friendship has the link shared by childhood maltreatment and proactive aggression also the connection between these associations weaker among youths with quality friendships. However, it was found that effects of childhood maltreatment and callous-unemotional traits on reactive aggression was not based on quality of friendships.

Odacı & Çelik (2020) investigated the potential predictive relationship between traumatic childhood experiences and a predisposition towards risk-taking and aggression in university students. Analysis indicated a significant positive correlation between childhood trauma—comprising physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment, as well as emotional neglect—and tendencies towards risk-taking and aggression. Specifically, physical and sexual abuse, along with gender, emerged as significant predictors of risk-taking behaviors, while physical abuse and gender were significant predictors of aggression. Additionally, the study found that physical and emotional abuse and emotional neglect differed by gender. The findings suggest that childhood trauma contributes to the development of adverse behaviors in adulthood.

Pichel et al. (2022) aimed to examine the potential relationship between school bullying, cyberbullying, and substance use. The findings revealed that alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis were the most commonly consumed substances, with high rates of risky consumption observed. Adolescents involved in school bullying as victims or perpetrators, showed higher rates of substance use and substance consumption behavior risky.

Gerhardt et al. (2022) investigated the prevalence and severity of types of childhood abuse in relation to specific substances and sex among individuals seeking treatment for substance use disorders. The study also reveals the impact of Childhood abuse and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and chronic stress on substance craving at admission and craving reduction during treatment. Findings indicated a higher prevalence and severity of all CM subtypes in individuals with SUD compared to the general population, with women experiencing more severe emotional and sexual abuse than men. Notably, patients with cannabis use disorder reported more severe emotional abuse than those using other substances.

Shin et al. (2020) aimed to investigate the relationship between childhood maltreatment and alcohol related problems, and to determine if this relationship is mediated by different drinking motives. Results indicated that both coping and enhancement drinking motives were associated with alcohol related issues. Additionally, abuse in childhood was indirectly linked to alcohol-related problems through the coping motive. These findings suggest that young adults with a history of CM may turn to alcohol in order to manage trauma related emotions. Therefore, addressing emotional distress in individuals exposed to abuse could be effective in preventing and treating alcohol-related problems in this at-risk population.

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South et al. (2022) aimed to investigate how early childhood experiences influence adult personality disorders and intimate partner aggression later in life. It is known that childhood maltreatment is associated with the perpetration of IPA in adulthood, though the effect size is typically small to moderate. Additionally, childhood maltreatment is linked to personality disorders as mentioned in DSM-5, which are also correlated with Intimate Partner Abuse in adult romantic relationships. Study revealed significant indirect effects from childhood maltreatment to Intimate Partner Abuse through variable personality pathology. The findings suggest that abuse in relationships is strongly associated with personality pathology traits, which may indicate early neglect and maltreatment.

Augsburger et al. (2019) reviewed on the cycle of violence in women, this meta-analysis investigates the associations and mechanisms underlying this phenomenon. Extensive database searches were conducted using terms related to female aggression, violence, delinquency, antisocial behavior, and offending, as well as childhood exposure to traumatic experiences, abuse, or maltreatment. Employing multi-level meta-analyses and meta-regressions based on Cohen's *d*, the study identified 34 relevant studies. The analysis found a positive but modest overall association between Childhood Maltreatment exposure and aggressive behavior. No significant differences were noted between specific types of abuse or neglect, although the correlations were smaller for sexual aggression and violent crime compared to other aggressive acts. These findings indicate the profound and lasting impact of Childhood Abuse.

Yang et al. (2024) aimed to identify distinct subgroups of childhood maltreatment among juvenile offenders and examine their associations with various outcomes, particularly psychopathy. The analysis revealed two subgroups: a non-maltreatment group and a maltreatment group. The maltreatment group exhibited higher levels of all types of maltreatment, with emotional neglect being particularly pronounced. Additionally, this subgroup demonstrated significantly elevated levels of psychopathy, callous-unemotional traits, lack of empathy, aggression, and anxiety across multiple self-report measures. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between childhood maltreatment and psychopathy in juvenile offenders, offering insights for targeted clinical interventions.

Massa et al. (2023) explored the role of hostile cognitions as a mediator between childhood maltreatment and adult aggression among veterans with co-occurring PTSD and AUD. The study analyzed data from 73 veterans involved in a randomized controlled trial, where participants self-reported on childhood maltreatment, hostile cognitions, and aggressive behaviors. Through three models, the research assessed how hostility mediates the associations between childhood maltreatment (including abuse and neglect) and aggression. The findings indicated complete mediation of the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adult aggression by hostile cognitions, with partial mediation observed for childhood abuse.

Guastaferrero et al. (2024) investigated how the association between child maltreatment and past-year Substance Use Disorder varies with age during emerging adulthood, considering sex and types of maltreatment. The research revealed that the strongest association between child maltreatment and SUD occurred at younger ages, where individuals with a history of maltreatment were three times more likely to report SUD. Variations in this association were observed based on sex, racial-ethnic background, and the type of maltreatment experienced across different age groups.

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Zhang et al. (2023) examined the mediating role of Dark Triad traits in the relationship between childhood abuse and aggression. Controlling for the inter-correlation between reactive and proactive aggression, the results indicated that all three Dark Triad traits mediated the effect of childhood abuse on proactive aggression, while only narcissism mediated the effect on reactive aggression. Furthermore, the COMT Val158Met polymorphism moderated the relationship between childhood abuse and psychopathy. Specifically, individuals with the Val/Val genotype who experienced higher levels of childhood abuse exhibited increased psychopathy, which was associated with elevated proactive aggression. These findings provide valuable insights into the mechanisms linking childhood abuse and aggression, highlighting the moderating role of genetic factors and the mediating role of personality traits.

Crouch et al. (2023) explored the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and marijuana use in lactating individuals, while also exploring whether positive childhood experiences influence this association. The study found that marijuana use during lactation was significantly higher among individuals reporting three or more adversities in childhood, household dysfunction, sexual abuse, or physical abuse. However, no significant association was observed between emotional abuse and marijuana use during lactation. Additionally, the analysis revealed no modifying effect of Positive Childhood Experiences on these associations.

Mishra et al. (2022) sought to identify subgroups of childhood maltreatment based on type and chronicity and examine their impact on changes in substance use from adolescence to early adulthood, while also considering the role of polygenic risk for substance use. The analysis revealed three sub-groups with different patterns of co-occurring childhood maltreatment: a high sexual abuse sub-group, a high physical abuse sub-group, and a normative sub-group with low levels of maltreatment. The high sexual abuse sub-group showed faster progression in substance use at low and medium polygenic risk levels. These findings highlight the complex interplay between genetic risk and specific types of childhood maltreatment in influencing substance use trajectories.

Zhu et al. (2020) developed a model to reveal the mediating mechanisms linking childhood adversities to aggressive tendencies, specifically focusing on hostile attribution bias (HAB) and anger rumination. The findings indicated that both HAB and anger rumination served as mediators. Moreover, a pairwise contrast of the indirect effects revealed that anger rumination had a significantly stronger mediating effect than HAB. The study suggests that childhood maltreatment can cause aggression during a provoking event in HAB and can also lead to delayed aggression following interpersonal conflict through anger rumination.

Yoon et al. (2020) studied the mediating role of deviant peer affiliation in the relationship between various forms of child maltreatment and adolescent substance use, including alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. The results demonstrated that deviant peer affiliation fully mediated the effect of emotional abuse on substance use in adolescents. Specifically, individuals who experienced emotional abuse were more likely to affiliate with deviant peers, which in turn was associated with higher levels of substance use. Interestingly, none of the four types of child maltreatment had a direct impact on adolescent substance use.

Ding et al. (2023) aimed to find the association between childhood psychological maltreatment and relational aggression, focusing on the mediating role of moral disengagement and the moderating influence of gender. The research indicates that

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maltreatment in childhood is linked with both moral rebellious behavior and aggression in adolescents. Additionally, moral rebellious behavior and relational aggression has positive relationships.

Shin et al. (2019) aimed to investigate how the warmth of parents moderates the impact of maltreatment in childhood on issues of alcohol in adulthood. The findings revealed a moderate effect of warmth by parents on the links of emotional abuse in childhood & problems of alcohol misuse. Specifically, individuals who experienced higher levels of paternal warmth exhibited a weaker association between emotional abuse and alcohol-related problems. but study found no significant not significance of warmth by mother: relationship between childhood negative events and alcohol use.

Charak et al. (2019) studied utilized latent class analysis to identify patterns of lifetime interpersonal victimization among LGB emerging adults, focusing on five types of child abuse and neglect and intimate partner violence. It was found both the high victimization and childhood emotional abuse and neglect classes exhibited higher levels of emotion dysregulation, depression, and anxiety symptoms, with the high victimization class reporting the highest levels of alcohol use.

METHODOLOGY

This article reviews research literature on the impact of childhood maltreatment on substance abuse and dependency and aggressive behavior. Accordingly, papers were sought to identify and combine research relevant according to the research topic selected. Articles were located by searching databases like Science direct, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Throughout the process the articles were searched with the keywords “Childhood Maltreatment” “Substance Dependency” & “Aggression”.

In conducting this literature review, a systematic search was initially conducted across databases, resulting in the identification of 354 potentially relevant articles related to childhood maltreatment, substance dependency, and aggressive behaviors. After screening these articles based on their abstracts and titles, 95 studies were selected for further screening, focusing on relevance to the study's objectives.

Involved full texts of these 95 articles to determine their suitability for inclusion based on their alignment with the research themes of childhood maltreatment, substance use disorders, aggression, and related outcomes. This process identified 50 articles that met the criteria for detailed review.

Following a thorough examination of the results, and relevance to the study's focus, 21 articles were selected on the basis of the relevance of the study. These studies reveal long term impacts that childhood experiences have on the behavioral health outcomes in adolescents and adults.

DISCUSSION

This review explored the effects of childhood maltreatment on substance abuse and aggressive behavior, the main focus of the report was to review the previous literature about possible aggressive behavior like relationship violence, aggression problem and substance misuse like alcoholism, and marijuana as an escape from memory of childhood maltreatment. Studies also showed that there were no significant effects of maternal warmth on the relationship between maltreatment and alcohol use. Childhood maltreatment,

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including physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect, significantly increases the risk of developing aggressive tendencies later in life. Moreover, studies also reveal that childhood maltreatment can be linked to risk of developing substance use disorders and negative college outcomes. Victims often turn to substances as a means of coping with trauma and emotional distress experienced during childhood. These studies also reveal that coping mechanisms can lead to long-term patterns of substance abuse and dependency, exacerbating the negative outcomes overall. Studies have claimed that childhood maltreatment can be a potential factor for violence in relationships, juvenile crimes and bullying later in life. Studies also reveal hostile cognition works as a mediator in experiences of maltreatment in childhood and aggressive behavior later in life. Understanding impact of childhood abuse on aggressive behavior and substance dependency underscores the importance of prevention, early intervention.

CONCLUSION

This Secondary research review demonstrates profound & multifaceted impact of early life maltreatment on both aggressive behavior and substance dependency. Numerous studies confirm that childhood maltreatment significantly increases the risk of developing substance use disorders, with individuals often turning to substances to cope with the trauma and emotional distress experienced during childhood. Moreover, there is a strong association between maltreatment and aggressive tendencies, including violence, bullying, and relationship aggression, with factors such as hostile cognition and low self-control mediating these behaviors. This review illustrates the complex interplay between early trauma and later behaviors, emphasizing the need for further research and targeted interventions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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