

Child maltreatment and Multivariate perspectives on role of resilience

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Introduction

Childhood is expected to be a period of safety, affection, learning, and emotional growth. However, for many children across the world, childhood becomes a period marked by abuse, neglect, fear, and emotional pain. Child maltreatment is a serious social and public health issue that affects children's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. Researchers today view child maltreatment from a multivariate perspective, influenced by multiple interacting factors rather than a single cause. At the same time, research highlights the powerful role of resilience, which helps children to overcome adversity and lead healthy, successful lives despite traumatic experiences.

Child maltreatment includes physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence, and bullying during childhood. Studies showed that child maltreatment is strongly associated with mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, and suicidal behaviour. It also affects academic performance, social relationships, emotional regulation and physical health throughout life.

Understanding Child Maltreatment Through a Multivariate Perspective

The multivariate perspective explains that child maltreatment occurs due to the interaction of several factors at different levels – individual, family, community, and societal. No single factor alone causes abuse or neglect.

1. Individual factors: Certain characteristics of parents or caregivers may increase the risk of maltreatment. These include stress, mental illness, substance abuse, poor anger control, low education, and a history of being abused during childhood. For example, a father struggling with alcohol addiction and unemployment may become physically aggressive toward his children due to frustration and emotional instability. Children themselves may also be vulnerable because of disability, chronic illness, or behavioural difficulties. A child with autism or ADHD may experience neglect or emotional abuse if caregivers lack patience or awareness.

2. Family factors: Family conflict, domestic violence, poor parenting skills, and lack of emotional bonding often

contribute to maltreatment. For instance, in homes where parents constantly fight, children may witness violence regularly. Even if the child is not directly beaten, exposure to domestic violence can create emotional trauma, fear, anxiety, and insecurity. Research shows that unstable family environments increase the likelihood of emotional and behavioural problems in children.

3. Community factors: Poverty, unsafe neighbourhoods, unemployment, lack of social support, and poor access to healthcare or counselling services also influence child maltreatment. A family living in extreme poverty may struggle to provide adequate nutrition, education, and healthcare for children. Neglect in such situations may arise not only from parental behaviour but also from broader social inequalities. Communities with limited child protection services may fail to identify and support at-risk children.

4. Societal and Cultural Factors: Social norms, gender discrimination, child labour, corporal punishment, and cultural acceptance of violence can normalize maltreatment. In some societies, harsh physical punishment is viewed as discipline rather than abuse. This cultural acceptance may prevent children from receiving protection and support. Media exposure, online exploitation, and cyberbullying are also emerging societal concerns affecting children today.

Impact of Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment affects every dimension of development.

- **Physical impact:** children may suffer injuries, malnutrition, sleep disturbances, developmental delays, and long-term health problems such as heart disease and obesity.
- **Psychological impact:** victims often experience depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, fear, emotional instability, and trauma-related disorders.
- **Cognitive and academic impact:** maltreated children may have difficulty concentrating, poor memory, reduced academic achievement, and school dropout.
- **Social impact:** children exposed to abuse may struggle to trust others, maintain friendships, or form healthy relationships later in life.

Research has shown that maltreated children exhibit higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behavioural problems and developmental impairments compared to non-maltreated children.

Despite severe adversity, not all children exposed to maltreatment experience negative outcomes. Some children demonstrate resilience- the ability to adapt positively and recover from difficult experiences. Resilience is not simply an inborn personality trait. It is a dynamic process shaped by supportive relationships, coping skills, emotional strength, and social resources.

Protective Factors Promoting Resilience

- A caring adult such as a teacher, grandparent, counsellor, or mentor can provide emotional security and encouragement. Example: a neglected child who receives emotional support from a school teacher may gradually develop confidence and motivation to continue education.
- Children who believe in their abilities are more likely to overcome challenges and develop healthy coping strategies.
- Teaching children how to manage anger, stress, and fear can reduce the long-term psychological impact of trauma regulates emotional skills.
- Peer support groups, counselling services, and community programs help children feel understood and act as a social support.
- Success in school activities, sports, music, or arts can strengthen self-confidence and provide a sense of achievement. Studies have identified self-esteem, coping skills, emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and social support as major resilience factors among individuals exposed to child maltreatment.

Real-Life Example of Resilience

Consider a child who grows up in a violent household where domestic abuse is common. Although the child initially struggles with fear and anxiety, participation in school activities and support from a caring grandmother help the child develop emotional stability and confidence. Over time, the child performs well academically, builds healthy friendships, and later becomes a social worker helping other vulnerable children.

Ultimately, resilience is both an outcome a process. It represents the potential to rise above adversity, shaped by a constellation of personal, relational and systemic factors. By understanding and strengthening these factors challenges and build resilient future for all.

Importance of Early Intervention

Early identification and intervention are essential in reducing the harmful effects of child maltreatment. Schools, healthcare professionals, social workers, counsellors, and families all play important roles in protecting children.

Effective interventions include: Parenting education programs, counselling therapy, school based mental health programmes, community awareness campaigns, child protection services, emotional skill-building programs

Conclusion

Child maltreatment is deeply complex and multifaceted issue that extends beyond the individual or familial context. A multilevel perspective provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the diverse and interconnected systems that influences child abuse and neglect. This approach considers not only the personal characteristics of the child but also the broader environment and societal structures that contribute to protect against maltreatment.
