



## The Consequences of Violence Towards Children

The more we know about the consequences of violence towards children the clearer the moral imperative to address it becomes. In both the short and the long term, exposure to violence during childhood has exclusively negative consequences on physical and mental health. Evidence also suggests that the whole of society may be harmed when its children suffer in this way. Accordingly, this problem should be treated as both socio-economic as well as moral in nature. In the first report to deliver a truly global perspective on the topic, UNICEF's 2006 *World Report on Violence Against Children* reveals the omnipresence of this phenomenon.

Recognition that violence towards children can occur anywhere may induce pessimism about the prospects of its final eradication. Country reports indicate that children from affluent and developing nations alike can suffer from abuse. Nevertheless, measures can be taken to prevent violence towards children and, as such, it should never be thought of as 'inevitable'. Effective prevention depends on comprehensive analysis of the root causes of this problem. Therefore, more effort must be made to understand why and how violence towards children occurs. Only then can governmental and non-governmental bodies invested in child protection deploy their resources confident that they are meeting the needs of the most vulnerable groups of children. As article 19 of the UNCRC stipulates, every child has the right to be free from *all* forms of violence. Since this fundamental right is enshrined in international law, inter-governmental organizations must strive to facilitate violence-free childhoods until this right is universally enjoyed.

Violence towards children can take different forms: physical, psychological and sexual. The consequences of experiencing violence in childhood are multi-faceted. Determining the causal link between violence and a given effect is sometimes complicated by other factors. For example, taking the case of poverty and childhood violence, while it is clear that there is indeed a connection its exact nature remains obscure. Being born into poverty increases the risk of experiencing childhood violence which in turn increases the risk of being locked into poverty in adulthood: thus, delineating cause from effect itself represents a challenge. Moreover, physical violence can produce psychological harm as well as physical harm. Similarly, the effects of psychological violence can sometimes manifest themselves physically. Research also shows us that when children experience one form of violence they are thereby placed at greater risk of other forms of abuse. This is known as 'poly-victimization'. The negative consequences of violence are cumulative, meaning that more detrimental effects result from poly-victimization.

It is difficult to disentangle the consequences of violence during childhood from other factors which may negatively impact a person's life (such as poverty or disability). Evidently there are interconnections between violence and disadvantage. For this reason, and because violence towards children has so many consequences, only a few shall be examined here. It is important, however, to remember that the causal connection between violence and its consequences does not imply inevitability. Each person's response to violence is necessarily unique. While childhood violence can have long-term repercussions, recovery is also possible.

### The Consequences of Violence:

- **Death:** The most alarming potential consequence of physical violence towards children is death. The likelihood of causing death to a child through physical violence is often considerably underestimated. Based on available data, the WHO calculates that as many as 53,000 children are murdered worldwide each year.<sup>1</sup> Research also suggests that the 'intent to punish' is a common precursor in many child homicide cases.<sup>2</sup> This indicates that the infliction of corporal punishment is inherently dangerous and has been shown to result in exclusively negative outcomes, the most severe of which is death.
- **Serious Injury:** While inflicting violence upon children can lead to death, it is more likely to lead instead to injury. The WHO estimates that for every death there are between 150-2400

cases of abuse.<sup>3</sup> Sustaining injury during childhood may be especially dangerous because the process of physical and cognitive development is on going. Traumatic brain injuries can be a cause and consequence of violence.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, disabled children are amongst the most vulnerable and therefore are at greater risk of violence. On the other hand, serious injury increases the risk of permanent disability. Thus a vicious cycle is established. Links have also been made between disability and the likelihood of being born into an abusive family where risks of domestic violence are higher.<sup>5</sup>

- **Physical Illness:** Violence during childhood seems to make people more susceptible to serious illnesses in adult life (such as chronic heart, lung or liver disease, cancer, obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol).<sup>6</sup> In the shorter term, violence towards young children is associated with increased susceptibility to asthma, gastrointestinal problems, headaches and flu.<sup>7</sup> The stress of violence can be so acute as to inhibit the functioning of the immune and nervous systems. Aside from the human suffering that such illnesses engender, there is clearly a heavy burden on society as a whole in terms of public health.
- **Cognitive Capacity:** The cognitive development of abused and neglected children can be severely hampered. The comparative linguistic incompetence of abused children is most noticeable in the very early years. 'Catching up' at a later stage represents a significant challenge for many children because in certain more extreme cases, brain development is impeded by lack of positive stimuli. Failure to cultivate a child's cognitive capacity constitutes serious and long-lasting harm. Impeded development in this regard prevents children from accessing and enjoying many of their rights and also places them at greater risk of violation.
- **PTSD:** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder may result from experiencing or witnessing extreme and / or constant violence during childhood. In a recent study examining the effects that *witnessing* domestic violence has on children, it was found that 56% of the 84 children assessed met the diagnostic criteria associated with PTSD.<sup>8</sup> A Dutch study has also confirmed the poly-victimization theory by showing that up to 70% of children growing up in violent households in which their mothers were subject to abuse also experience violence directly.<sup>9</sup> Physical violence can lead to a whole range of mental health problems such that it would be a grave mistake to presume that physical violence produced only physical consequences.
- **Mental Health Problems:** Although psychological violence and emotional neglect may be harder to detect than physical violence, its effects can be just as insidious. One study found that 80% of young people whose childhood had been blighted with violence suffered from at least one kind of psychiatric disorder by the age of 21.<sup>10</sup> Given that in Europe alone, as many as 55 million children are thought to suffer from psychological violence each year, this is extremely disconcerting.<sup>11</sup> Depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and suicide are all associated with psychological violence during the formative years of childhood.<sup>12</sup>
- **Socio-economic:** All forms of violence towards children have socio-economical effects. The correlation between truancy and experiencing violence goes some way towards explaining why, *typically* speaking, children with a violent background display poorer academic performance. In turn, this limits the degree to which victimized children are able to make contributions to their society and thus the prosperity and growth of entire communities is adversely affected by violence. On the global scale, the economic impact of physical, psychological and sexual violence towards children is thought to result in losses of \$7 trillion per year, an almost unimaginable figure.<sup>13</sup>
- **Behavioural:** The list of behavioural problems associated with childhood violence appears never ending. Abused children are at increased risk of alcoholism, substance misuse and engaging in high-risk sexual activity in subsequent years. One survey also found that the chances of running into conflict with the law as a juvenile are increased by 59% for abused children. Further, children who experience violence are 25% more likely to become teenage parents than are their non-abused peers. On the question of whether victims are more likely to become perpetrators of violence themselves, the empirical evidence is mixed. Trans-generational violence however can be one consequence of childhood violence.

These are just some of the potential consequences of violence towards children. Even from this very cursory examination of the effects of violence, it is clear that the negative repercussions are closely interconnected. For example, if a child should sustain a serious injury she or he is immediately placed at greater risk of impeded cognitive development which in turn makes the child more vulnerable to abuse. A holistic approach, tackling poverty, discrimination and the attitudes/ customs which allow violence towards children to go unchecked, is therefore absolutely essential for its elimination.

## References

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