Parental Maltreatment and Children’s Psychological Maladjustment and Personality Impairment: Global Meta-analytic Evidence

Abdul Khaleque ¹ and Mosammat Nazma Khatun ².

Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA.

Department of Counselor Education, Gonzaga University, USA

*Corresponding author: Abdul KhalequeDepartment of Human Development and Family Sciences, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT 06269, USA.

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Child maltreatment, by caregiver---especially by parents, is often used as an umbrella term covering all forms of child abuse and child neglect (McCoy & Keen, 2013). Definition of child maltreatment may also vary by prevailing cultural values as they relate to parenting and child development (Conley 2010). In addition, definitions of child maltreatment including abuse and neglect can also vary among child protection agencies, legal and medical communities, public health officials, researchers, practitioners, and child advocates nationally and internationally depending on the interests and purposes of these organizations (Fisher & Lab, 2010).

Despite these differences among health professionals and researchers, there is a general agreement that abuse refers to harmful acts (usually deliberate) of commission, while neglect refers to harmful acts (intentional or unintentional) of omission (Australian National Institute of Family Studies, 2018). Child maltreatment includes both acts of commission and acts of omission on the part of parents or other caregivers that can cause actual or a potential harm to a child (McCoy & Keen, 2013). Some health professionals and authors consider neglect as a kind of abuse, while others do not, because the harm might be unintentional, or because the caregivers did not understand the severity of the problem due to cultural differences about how to treat a child (Mehnaz, 2013).

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.” (WHO, 2006). The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses the term child maltreatment to refer to both acts of commission (abuse), which include “words or overt actions that cause harm, potential harm, or threat of harm to a child”, and acts of omission (neglect), meaning “the failure to provide for a child’s basic physical, emotional, or educational needs or to protect a child from harm or potential harm” (CDC, 2017). This paper will focus on the effects of child maltreat by parents in the forms of parental rejection, abuse and neglect, and hostility and aggression.

An overview of 12 meta-analyses (Khaleque & Ali, 2017) conducted on a total of 551 studies on an aggregated sample of 149,440 respondents from five continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, and South America) and 31 countries (Bangladesh, Barbados, China, Colombia, Croatia, Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic and Slovakia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, Greece, India, Iran, Jamaica, Japan, Kuwait, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Romania, South Korea, Serbia, Spain, St. Kitts, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United States), to test the effects of maltreatment by parents in the forms of rejection, neglect, hostility, and aggression, on children’s and adult offspring’s psychological adjustment/maladjustment, and negative personality dispositions. Results showed significant pancultural associations between parental maltreatment and children’s, adolescents’ adult offspring’s psychological maladjustment and negative personality dispositions (such as dependence, negative self-esteem, negative self-adequacy, emotional instability, emotional unresponsiveness, and negative worldview). Results further revealed that although both paternal and maternal maltreatment have significant impacts on children’s and adolescents’ psychological maladjustment, however, paternal maltreatment has greater impact than maternal maltreatment.

Another meta-analysis (Khaleque, 2015) on 33 studies from 15 countries on four continents involving 11,755 children showed that perceived maternal and paternal indifference and neglect correlated significantly with the psychological maladjustment and negative personality dispositions of children across ethnicities, cultures, and geographical boundaries.

Findings from these meta-analytic reviews may be useful to clinicians in their efforts to understand and treat children who experience parental maltreatment in the forms of parental rejection.

Reference

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