

Child Abuse and Neglect

Executive Summary

Note: This is one of three Bar Book chapters considering the specific impacts of different forms of child abuse and neglect. This chapter should be read in conjunction with [‘Perinatal, Infant and Childhood Exposure to, and Experience of, Domestic & Family Violence’](#) and [‘Childhood Sexual Abuse’](#). Other relevant chapters include [‘Out-of-Home Care’](#), [‘Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders \(FASD\)’](#) and [‘Interrupted School Attendance and Suspension’](#).

Child abuse and neglect, or child maltreatment, is endemic in Australia. Children can experience more than one type of abuse or neglect, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence and multi-maltreatment.¹

The landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) provides the first nationally representative empirical data about the prevalence of each of the five types of child abuse and neglect, as well as their impacts. Data were collected from a sample of 8500 Australians aged 16 years and older.² Child maltreatment is far more prevalent than previously estimated and occurs in all cultures and communities in Australia.³

Child maltreatment can have lifelong and intergenerational consequences.⁴ Almost half (48%) of people who experienced child abuse or neglect have a mental health disorder, compared with 1 in 5 (21.6%) people without a history of maltreatment.⁵ Child maltreatment can fundamentally change a child’s cognition and neurobiological systems and impair emotion recognition and regulation.⁶ These changes are linked to behaviours that increase the risk of contact with the criminal justice system.⁷

A scoping review of 345 studies categorised problems that arose for children or adults in the aftermath of neglect as ‘physical health issues, atypical neurobiology, developmental problems, attachment and relationship problems, emotional problems, mental health problems, behavioral problems, further traumatization, parenting problems, more entrenched involvement with the service system, compromised quality of life, and socio-economic difficulties.’⁸

Evidence suggests that post-traumatic stress and trauma can affect the brain, resulting in changes in brain structure, brain function and stress hormone regulation. These changes can impact memory consolidation, processing of emotional information, cognitive development and language development, as well as compromising executive functioning, emotion regulation⁹ and stress responses (fight or flight).¹⁰ Stress hormone dysregulation has been associated with an increased risk of alcohol and substance abuse disorders.¹¹

Child maltreatment has been linked to adverse effects continuing into adulthood, including: intergenerational transmission of abuse, neglect and re-victimisation; physical and mental health problems including suicidal behaviour, obesity, eating disorders, and alcohol and substance abuse (use disorders); aggression, violence and criminal behaviour; high-risk sexual behaviour; and homelessness.¹²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over-represented in the child protection system, and children and young people in out-of-home care can experience a range of adverse outcomes.¹³ However, a large number of cases involve neglect, the least prevalent form of child maltreatment in Australia.¹⁴ Poverty is prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities due to the ongoing effects of colonisation, dispossession and oppression, and has over time been closely associated with neglect.¹⁵

¹ Divna Haslam et al, '[The Prevalence and Impact of Child Maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#)' (Brief Report, Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology, 2003) 3 ('*ACMS Brief Report*').

² Ibid 15.

³ Ibid 13–14.

⁴ Department of Health and Human Services (US), '[Long-Term Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect](#)' (Child Welfare Information Gateway Factsheet, April 2019) 1.

⁵ James G Scott et al, '[The Association between Child Maltreatment and Mental Disorders in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#)' (2023) 218(6 Supp) *Medical Journal of Australia* (2023) S26, S30.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Nina Papalia et al, '[Child Sexual Abuse and Criminal Offending: Gender-Specific Effects and the Role of Abuse Characteristics and Other Adverse Outcomes](#)' (3018) 23(4) *Child Maltreatment* NP4341; Catia G Malvaso, Paul H Delfabbro and Andrew Day, '[The Child Protection and Juvenile Justice Nexus in Australia: A Longitudinal Examination of the Relationship between Maltreatment and Offending](#)' (2017) 64 *Child Abuse & Neglect* 42.

⁸ Annette L Jackson et al, '[Childhood Neglect and Its Implications for Physical Health Neurobiology and Development: A Scoping Review of the Literature](#)' (2022) *Developmental Child Welfare* 4(2) 114, 121.

⁹ Sara McLean, '[The Effect of Trauma on the Brain Development of Children](#)' (Australian Institute of Family Studies, CFCA Practice Resource, June 2016).

¹⁰ Ibid; Elizabeth T C Lippard and Charles B Nemeroff, '[The Devastating Clinical Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect: Increased Disease Vulnerability and Poor Treatment Response in Mood Disorders](#)' (2020) 177(1) *American Journal of Psychiatry* 20; Paraskevi Kazakou, Nicolas C Nicolaides and George P Chrousos, '[Basic Concepts and Hormonal Regulators of the Stress System](#)' (2023) 96(1) *Hormone Research in Paediatrics* 8.

¹¹ Lippard and Nemeroff (n 10) 27.

¹² Australian Institute of Family Studies, '[Effects of Child Abuse and Neglect for Adult Survivors](#)' (CFCA Policy and Practice Paper, January 2014).

¹³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, '[Child Protection Australia 2021–22](#)' (AIHW web report, 2023, updated 7 May 2024); Department of Social Services (Cth), '[Safe and Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031](#)' (National Framework, 2021) 16 ('*Safe and Supported*').

¹⁴ Haslam et al, *ACMS Brief Report* (n 1) 14.

¹⁵ SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children, '[National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021–2031](#)' (Successor Plan Consultation Report, November 2021); Simon Haworth et al, 'A Systematic Review of Measures of Child Neglect' (2024) 34(1) *Research of Social Work Practice* 17; B J Newton, '[Understanding Child Neglect in Aboriginal Families and Communities in the Context of Trauma](#)' (2019) 24(2) *Child & Family Social Work* 218.