

## **Impact of Physical Abuse on Children**

Child physical abuse damages children physically, emotionally and socially. The most obvious and immediate result is physical.

### **Physical**

An abused child may experience one or more of the following: hitting, shaking, choking, biting, kicking, punching, burning, poisoning, suffocating, or being held underwater. Physical abuse may lead to bruises, cuts, welts, burns, fractures, internal injuries, or in the most extreme cases death.

Initial impact on children will be the immediate pain and suffering and medical problems caused by the physical injury. However, the pain will last long after the bruises and wounds have healed. The longer physical abuse of a child occurs, the more serious the impact. Chronic physical abuse can result in long term physical disabilities, including brain damage, hearing loss, or eye damage.

The age at which the abuse takes place influences the impact of the damage. For example, infants who are physically abused are more likely to experience long-term physical effects and neurological alterations such as irritability, lethargy, tremors, and vomiting. In more serious cases where the abuse was more forceful or longer in duration, the infant may experience seizures, permanent blindness or deafness, mental and developmental delays or retardation, coma, paralysis, and in many cases death. This has recently been called the "Shaken Baby Syndrome" since it most often occurs as a result of violent shaking or shaking of the head.

### **Emotional**

Beyond the physical problems experienced by children, there are other consequences of physical abuse. Studies of physically abused children and their families indicate that a significant number of psychological problems are associated with child physical abuse. Abused children compared with non-abused children may have more difficulty with academic performance, self-control, self-image and social relationships. A recent US study comparing physically abused and non-abused children provided considerable evidence of the negative and lasting consequences of physical abuse. The physically abused children in the study experienced far greater problems at home, at school, amongst peers and in the community.

Children who are physically abused have a predisposition to many emotional disturbances. They may experience feelings of low self-esteem and depression or may

be hyperactive and overly anxious. Many of these children may exhibit behavioral problems such as aggression towards other children or siblings. Other emotional problems include anger, hostility, fear, humiliation, and an inability to express feelings. The long-term emotional consequences can be devastating. For example, children who are abused are at risk of experiencing low self-esteem, depression, drug or alcohol dependence, and increased potential for child abuse as a parent.

### **Social**

The social impact on children who have been physically abused is perhaps less obvious, yet still substantial. Immediate social consequences can include an inability to form friendships with peers, poor social skills, poor cognitive and language skills, distrust of others, over-compliance with authority figures, and a tendency to solve interpersonal problems with aggression. In their adult life, the long-term consequences can impact both their family and their community. There are financial costs to the community and society in general, e.g., funding social welfare programs and services and the foster care system. Studies have shown that physically abused children are at a greater risk for mental illness, homelessness, crime, and unemployment. All of these affect the community and society in general and are the social costs of physical abuse.