

Factors causing abusive behaviour



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Discuss the pathways that lead to a child becoming an abuser

Introduction

Abuse can take many forms, including physical, sexual, psychological or financial ^[1]. It can also be verbal and emotional ^[2]. There are frequently difficulties associated with defining abuse ^[3], which exists within social, cultural and legal parameters; for example using physical chastisement with children in some cultures is considered to be the norm ^[4]. In the UK, while the use of implements to hit children has been made illegal ^[5], the debate about smacking continues; it is still permissible to use 'reasonable chastisement' ^[6], although there has been criticism of this from such agencies as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) who assert that any form of physical punishment should be outlawed.

Physical abuse is more comprehensively defined as:

...hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning, scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm...(p. 533) ^[7]

The definition of sexual abuse varies according to the nature of the victim (for example in relation to child sexual abuse); however a broad definition is that it involves the misuse of power, which might be combined with the use of force, to gain sexual gratification from a vulnerable person ^[8]

Psychological and emotional abuse have some similarities, however psychological abuse is distinguishable from emotional abuse in that it results

in some form of cognitive or mental impairment ^[9] whereas emotional abuse is, arguably, more difficult to quantify as there is a degree of subjectivity involved; however it has been described as the use of one or more of the following behaviours: humiliation, harassment, verbal abuse, demonstrating jealous and possessive behaviour, using threats, abandonment, destruction or removal of items that are important to the recipient, using controlling behaviour (for example within a relationship) and undermining someone with a view to lowering their self- esteem ^[10]

Financial abuse is defined as:

The intentional or opportunistic appropriation of the income, capital or property of a vulnerable person through theft, fraud, deception, undue influence or exploitation... (p. 17). ^[11]

Verbal abuse is frequently a component of other types of abuse; for example psychological and emotional abuse is likely to involve verbal abuse, which essentially, is the use of language which is disrespectful and hurtful to the recipient ^[12] .

A complex form of abuse arises from Munchausen syndrome by Proxy ^[13] . This involves a parent or care- giver (most frequently the mother) giving an often plausible impression to health practitioners that a child is ill, by falsifying symptoms, providing false specimens, administering substances which affect the child's health, or by inflicting wounds or interfering with existing injuries. Quite often the mother has some health care experience so is equipped with the knowledge to inform her actions, and is also able to

feign concern while at the same time giving the impression of being pleasant and cooperative. Inevitably the child is likely to suffer unnecessary distress, pain and discomfort and as such the effect of this syndrome is considered to be a form of child abuse, involving as it does physical, psychological and emotional harm. Health professionals may unwittingly be complicit in the abuse by conducting investigations and invasive procedures which can cause further distress ^[14]. The mother is motivated by her own psychological needs for attention and a sense of worth. The reasons why somebody should develop this syndrome are not clear, and various theories of causation have been put forward, such as personality disorder, depressive illness, emotional disturbance and substance abuse ^[15]. Some sources report that the mother herself may have been abused as a child ^[16]. If this is the case then this could be one explanation for why a child becomes an abuser.

There are various manifestations of abuse within the context of this question. Some children demonstrate abusive behaviour while still in their childhood ^[17]; a notorious and extreme example of this is the murder of two-year old James Bulger by two ten year old boys in 1993 ^[18]. Other children go on to display abusive behaviour during their adolescence ^[19], ^[20], ^[21] while in other people, abusive behaviour does not emerge until adulthood despite it being possible to trace influential factors back to their childhood ^[22]

The abused who becomes the abuser

It is a widely held assumption that people who become abusers, were abused themselves and indeed there is evidence to support this contention [23] , [24] . Children who grow up within an abusive environment are three times more likely to become abusers, however it also important to acknowledge that not all children who have been abused go on to become abusers [25] . It would appear that it is more likely for abused children to become abusers if they grow up within an environment where multifactorial influences are present such as a family history of violence, sexual abuse by a female, maternal neglect and lack of supervision [26] , [27] . It is important to gain an understanding of why children who have been abused might themselves become abusers, as these factors can be addressed as part of a preventative strategy (breaking the cycle of abuse). Firstly there is evidence that there may be intergenerational transmission of parenting style, whether good or bad; the child simply goes on to practice what they have absorbed as a child, some of which might be on an unconscious level [28] . It is also possible that the person is left with feelings of rage, anger and resentment from having been abused and the disempowering effect that this has had on them. They might go on to project these feelings onto a more vulnerable person than they such as a child; using them to vent their feelings manifested as a form of abuse. The person who was abused as a child might feel angry if they are unable to punish or hurt the perpetrator of their abuse and instead might turn on a substitute who becomes the object of their frustrations [29] , [30] . They might even use the victim of their abuse as a means of offloading the residual emotions they have as a result of their own experiences of abuse.

Ward and Siegert's pathways model ^[31] reflects the terminology within the title and offers some explanations for the reasons that people go on to commit sexual abuse, specifically. There are five pathways within this model: intimacy and social skills deficits; deviant sexual scripts; emotional dysregulation; anti-social cognitions and multiple dysfunctional mechanisms. These are relevant to the question because the origin of sexually abusive behaviour is linked to early life experiences within at least three of these pathways; it is the manifestation of the behaviours that varies. Intimacy and social skills deficits are associated with childhood experiences of abuse and neglect and insecure attachment relationships with adults. . Elsewhere attachment deficit has been cited as a cause of violent behaviour in adulthood towards a partner, which is associated with fear of abandonment ^[32] . The deviant sexual scripts pathway is explained by the experience of childhood sexual abuse; the individual's ' sexual script' reflecting their past experience. Multiple dysfunctional mechanisms are said to develop from childhood experiences of sexual victimisation or early exposure to sexual behaviour and/ or material. The value of this model has been identified as offering a framework for appropriate treatment for sex offenders, as the underlying reason for the behaviour can be identified and addressed ^[33] .

Psychosocial factors

Psychosocial factors such as parental loss due to death, separation or divorce have been linked with children becoming abusers ^[34] ; however the likelihood of this occurring is increased if there are multiple factors involved,

as indicated on p. 4, para. 1. It is also possible that the child who has not been directly abused themselves, but has witnessed violence at close quarters, for example their mother being abused by their father, learns that violence is an appropriate behaviour in relation to the resolution of conflict [35]. However it could be argued that exposing children to such behaviour in itself constitutes a form of abuse, as it is distressing and can have long-term psychological effects. In relation to exposure to violence, there is a body of evidence to link the relationship between playing violent video games, and watching violent films, with an increase in aggressive behaviour [36], [37]. A link was made between the killing of James Bulger (referred to above on p. 3, para. 2) and the influence of video violence, although there were also several other proposed causes for the incident [38]. There are also links made between socioeconomic factors and the incidence of abuse [39], [40], however once again there are likely to be other, interrelated contributory factors, such as unemployment and alcohol or drug abuse.

Conclusion

An extensive review of the literature yields a compelling argument that many abusers were themselves abused as children. However it is also clear that not all children who have been abused become abusers themselves. There are gaps in the literature in relation to examining the reasons why some individuals and not others, are able to turn away from the effects of abuse. It would appear that the reasons why a child becomes an abuser are complex and multifactorial; it has been suggested at several points in this essay that the effects of one single causative factor can be strengthened by

the presence of other negative factors. In summary, the factors that might cause a child to become an abuser include: being the victim of abuse, be it physical, sexual, emotional or a combination of one or more types; being exposed to violent behaviour (for example between parents); exposure to materials that depict violence, such as magazines, films and video games; emotional deprivation leading to attachment deficit; loss of a parent; exposure to sexually explicit materials and/ or behaviour; neglect; the abuse of alcohol and/ or drugs within the home; poverty and a lack of (non-abusive) discipline and guidance.

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