The Affective And Cognitive Sequelae Of Child Maltreatment

Developmental Tasks of Childhood
Based on a range of child development models, it is suggested that there are several essential tasks that young children need to accomplish:

1. They must have an intact central nervous system, and acquire basic motor and cognitive skills
2. They need to become securely attached to a consistent caregiver in order to establish a secure base and feel that the world is a safe and consistent place
3. They need to feel good about themselves, have a sense of efficacy, validity and worthwhileness, and have a sense of their own identity if they are to master the tasks of learning
4. There is a need for a nurturing, responsive and supportive environment responsive to the child’s physical and emotional needs

When these tasks fail to be accomplished, through maltreatment for example, we can expect the effects to be noticeable. The following are descriptions of some studies undertaken in this field.

Cognitive Sequelae of Maltreatment
The effects of abuse on intellectual and academic performance.
One study found that even when brain damaged children were removed from the sample, there was still a ten times higher incidence of mental retardation in abusive and neglectful groups than control groups.
Another study of cognitive development in low income families found that the abused children scored significantly lower on developmental testing than did matched controls from the same low income population. It was further found that children who were failing to thrive did worse than those who suffered sustained physical abuse.

The conclusions:
It is not poverty that leads to poor developmental outcome, but the effect of maltreatment. These conclusions were repeated by other studies that found maltreated children showing significantly delayed reading age and higher incidence of anti social behaviours. Again the outcome for the failure to thrive children was even more compromised than the abused group.

Emotional and Psychological Sequelae of Maltreatment

In Infancy
- Maltreated infants were found to be socially and emotionally withdrawn with a blank sober look that did not express their feelings
- Demonstrated a lack of pleasure - characterised by lack of responsiveness to play etc. In one study it was found that abusive mothers ignored more, initiated less, and did less verbal teaching, and tended to be more negative. The abused infants complied less with their mothers’ attempts to play

In Early Childhood
- Another study showed that abusive mothers did not use verbal means to teach and did not label objects or ask questions of their children. The abused child tended to ignore the mother, leading to a pattern of lack of interaction - neglect
- Children of psychologically unavailable mothers with and without abuse scored lower on the developmental scales, were more negative, with more frustration and whining. They showed very poor coping mechanisms in a stressful situation and demonstrated the greatest degree of psycho-pathology

The neglected children had the lowest self esteem, and were most dependent on their teachers. They were distractive and impulsive and lacked flexibility and creativity.

Older Children
Other studies of school age children found abused children had negative self concepts in which they depicted themselves as being sad, unpopular, doing bad things and feeling that their parents had too high expectations of them. They were more aggressive particularly towards peers, had difficulty socialising, or establishing trust.

It has also been born out that abused children:
• Have an external locus of control, less ability to adapt, are slow to develop self confidence and have a tendency to be more aggressive and non-trusting.
• Are less socially sensitive to the emotional states of others
• Are more egocentric and less able to see others’ view points
• Base moral judgements on external sanctions rather than internalised moral values
• Have less advanced social role concepts and an inability to comprehend more subtle complex relationships.
• Have lower IQs

It is suggested that the under achievement seen in abused children is to a considerable extent a function of their social incompetence, their need for external cues and their lack of motivation and self feedback rather than inherent defects in ability.

General
There is evidence of a progression of dysfunction and maladaptation starting in infancy, leading to poor socialisation and academic performance. Young maltreated children functioned more poorly socially, and emotionally at each stage of development. At school they were least competent to work independently, exhibit leadership, or cooperate. A significant number required special help in the classroom and adapted poorly.

The neglected children were more self destructive, inattentive, nervous, and withdrawn than other abused children. They were also unpopular, aggressive and obsessive-compulsive and often presented more problems than physically abused children.

Discussion
It has been argued that psychological maltreatment is the context in which all abuse occurs and is the keystone for determining development.

Psychological maltreatment includes:

• Rejecting (no affection, no recognition of child’s accomplishment)
• Terrorising (threats of vague or extreme punishment, scare tactics, a life of unpredictability)
• Ignoring (parents emotional unavailability)
• Isolating (preventing child developing social relationships)
• Corrupting (mis-socialises, and reinforces antisocial or deviant behaviours)

Essential for children to learn are a clear sense of self, internal locus of control, able to take responsibility for own actions, be willing and able to take risks to master elements and skills for learning. When children’s lives contain inconsistencies, psychological maltreatment, chaos, and violence, their energy is directed towards survival rather than exploration, mastery or joy.

This vicious cycle can lead to trans-generational abuse, criminality, professional failure and inadequate adults.

Adult Sequelae of Maltreatment
One of the questions frequently asked is “What happens in the long run to children who are maltreated?” A study undertaken by McCord, using social service records, looking at the long term effects on men from: (a) rejecting, (b) neglectful, (c) abusive, and (d) loving parents, found:

• An increase in juvenile delinquency in the children of maltreating parents
• 53% of men rejected by parents were convicted of crimes as opposed to 25% who were neglected, and 39% who were abused. Only 23% from loving families were convicted of crimes.