

Childhood Trauma's Impact on a Child's Developing Brain

Studies on the brain show that physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in childhood can:

- *cause permanent damage,*
- *reduce the size of parts of the brain,*
- *impact the way a child's brain copes with daily stress, and*
- *can result in enduring behavioral health problems such as depression, anxiety, aggression, impulsiveness, delinquency, hyperactivity, and substance abuse.*

With help from families, providers, and the community, young children can demonstrate resilience when dealing with trauma.

New brain imaging surveys and other techniques show that physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in childhood (as well as stress in the form of exposure to violence, warfare, or famine) can cause permanent damage to the neural structure and function of the developing brain. In addition to the implications outlined in the data point above, traumatic or stressful experiences can lead to conditions such as borderline personality disorder, dissociative episodes, hallucinations, delusions, psychosis, paranoia, anger outbursts, and impaired attention. Whether in the form of physical, emotional or sexual trauma, or exposure to warfare or famine, stress can set off a ripple of hormonal changes and key brain alterations that may be irreversible.¹

However, research has shown that caregivers can buffer the impact of trauma and promote better outcomes for children even under stressful times when the following Strengthening Families Protective Factors² are present:

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social and emotional competence of children

Trauma Data Source:

1. Teicher, M.H. (2002). Scars that won't heal: The neurobiology of child abuse. *Scientific American*. 68-75. (Retrieved from http://www.icscommunitynetwork.org/scarsthatwon_theal+.pdf [PDF - 295 KB]).
2. Horton, C. (2003). Protective factors literature review. Early care and education programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Center for the Study of Social Policy. (Learn more at www.strengtheningfamilies.net)