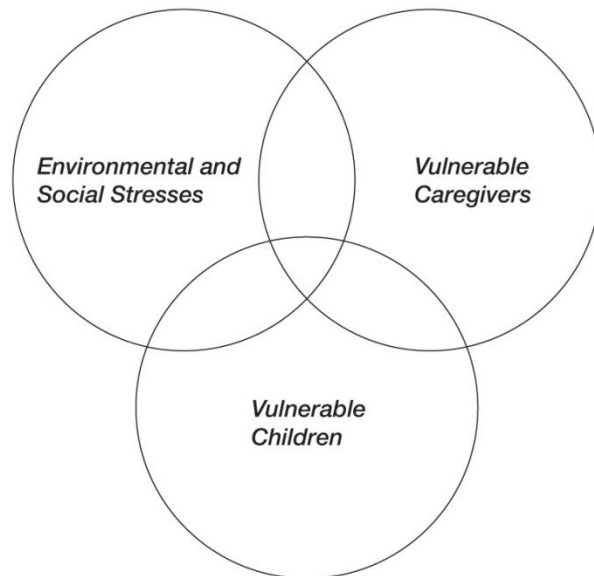


CAUSES & DYNAMICS OF CHILD ABUSE

Neglect and physical and emotional abuse are the result of complex interactions of a number of factors,¹ some of which relate to the:

- environmental and/or social stresses that impact on the child and family;
- caregiver and his/her strengths and vulnerabilities; and
- child, including characteristics or circumstances that contribute to difficulties in the parent-child relationship.

The causes for neglect and physical and emotional abuse are usually due to a series of stresses that build up over time. The 3-circle diagram and examples below illustrate how the causes of child abuse are interconnected.² Remember that cultural considerations influence attitudes and practices regarding family relationships, how children should be raised, and the definition of abusive acts.



- Environmental and social stresses that impact on the child and family:
 - financial difficulties (e.g., unemployment, poor housing, poverty)
 - many children close in age
 - single parenthood
 - marital problems
 - gender roles and roles in marriage (e.g., lack of spousal support because it is the “woman’s role” to look after the children)

¹ It should be noted that the factors presented do not pertain to sexual abuse.

² Adapted from Rimer & Prager, *Reaching Out: Working Together to Identify and Respond to Child Victims of Abuse*, 1998, p. 19)

- immigration and resettlement
 - lack of proficiency in the primary language of the broader community
 - being isolated in the community, with few supports
 - lack of quality child care, health care and other social supports
 - the amount of violence and sexual inequality in the community, including media
- Vulnerable caregivers who may have more difficulty coping:
 - chronic health problems (e.g., depression, physical illness)
 - substance abuse
 - personal history of abuse; violence in the family; childhood trauma
 - difficulty controlling anger
 - low self-esteem
 - poor parenting skills that are influenced by age, education, personal experiences, and/or social norms that encourage harsh physical punishment (e.g., how to guide children's behaviour, how to solve problems and conflicts)
 - unrealistic expectations for children's development
 - the caregiver's cognitive abilities
 - a stressful life event (e.g., a serious illness/death in the family)
- Vulnerable children may have characteristics that make them more difficult to care for putting them at risk for abuse:
 - illness or special need
 - challenging personality/temperament
 - constant crying and cannot be easily soothed or comforted
 - problems with attachment (e.g., hospitalization due to prematurity, extensive involvement with many professionals reducing parent-child time)
 - an unwanted child or child that does not fulfill the parent's expectations(e.g., sex, appearance, congenital abnormality)

The following quote by Lisabeth Schorr illustrates that as family stress escalates, so does the possibility of child abuse.

"Whether the stress stems from insufficient income, a difficult child, an impaired adult, family violence and discord, inadequate housing, chronic hunger and poor health, or surroundings of brutality, hopelessness and despair – these are circumstances in which affection withers into hostility, discipline turns into abuse, stability dissolves into chaos, and love becomes neglect" (Meston, 1993, p. 20).

Remember that as stresses increase, there is the risk that the physical and emotional care of a child decreases. Supporting families and each other helps to support the children.

Protective factors constitute the strengths of the child, family and community that improve or change the likelihood of harm to the child. Protective factors include:

- a secure parent-child attachment (one of the strongest protective factors against child abuse)
- good self-esteem, physical and mental health, interpersonal and problem-solving skills
- knowledge of children's physical and emotional developmental abilities, and high sensitivity to their needs in all developmental areas (including assessing dangerous situations and acting to protect)
- supportive relationships among family members and friends
- community services, programs and information that support children and families (e.g., affordable quality child care and education; prenatal care and parenting; public awareness campaigns)
- the ability to mobilize help in times of stress
- laws that protect children and support parents (e.g., financially supported parental leave, including caring for an ill child; fair wages)