

The Psychobiology of Childhood Maltreatment

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Child maltreatment is a grave psychosocial, medical, and legal problem that has serious consequences for its victims and for society. For the purposes of this article, we define child maltreatment as including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; neglect; and exposure to domestic and community violence. Despite the widespread prevalence of child maltreatment in our society, little is known about the psychobiologic mechanisms underlying its short-term and long-term effects. This article focuses on the potential psychobiologic sequelae of child maltreatment. We begin with a discussion of the state of research, emphasizing the methodologic difficulties inherent in this field of study. Next, we review relevant preclinical and clinical studies, often drawing on animal models of stress and on research with adults suffering from combat-related posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Throughout, we offer suggestions for future research opportunities.