

Are you getting this?

Successful Emancipation

Physical, sexual and emotional abuse and physical and emotional neglect create negative effects that may hinder an adolescents striving for emancipation. For the youth without a history of maltreatment, adolescence is a time of profound change and development cognitively, emotionally, physically, sexually, morally and socially. Growth in these areas is likely to occur much less evenly in maltreated youths, who may remain fixed at earlier developmental levels. Consequently, they may have different experiences in interacting with the normal institutions of adolescent life (i.e. family, biological or foster, school, work and the peer group) than will their peers without a history of abuse or neglect. Helping a youth in foster care to overcome the negative effects of maltreatment requires that caregivers understanding to deal effectively with potential obstacles to achieving developmental milestones. Following a brief overview of the effect of maltreatment on development, this newsletter examines the consequences of specific types of abuse and neglect on adolescents in foster care. With a focus on the partnership of foster parents and workers, various interventions are considered for meeting foster adolescents needs for health care, educational and vocational or recreational services as they are helped to overcome the effects of earlier abuse and to prepare for interdependent living.

Effects of Maltreatment

The period of adolescence is a significant period in live for the development of the total personality as are the first years in childhood. There are six key experiences to be worked through are called "firsts." We delineate these as experiencing physical/sexual maturity, experiencing withdrawal of and from adult benevolent protection, consciousness of self-interaction, re-evaluation of values, becoming an active participant in society, and a life force or extraordinary physical capacity. The adolescent in foster care who has been seriously abused or neglected experiences these challenges, so necessary to the transition to adulthood, problematically. For example, sexually abused youths may hate their bodies or regard them as a thing to be used, much as their perpetrators did. The withdrawal of benevolent adult protection can be profoundly alarming to youths who have been maltreated.



Some youths exiting foster care may never have experienced benevolent adult relationships while others may have finally landed emotionally wrung out, in a caring foster home. After a possible wrenching struggle to develop trust in nurturing caregivers, these youths are unlikely to see foster parents efforts to support emancipation as benevolent. Instead, they are more likely to feel rejected or pushed out of the nest. For maltreated youths in foster care, experiencing consciousness of self in interaction may be confusing and overwhelming. If the consciousness of self involves form reflected images of others then the multiplicity of caregivers and the host of conflicting messages given to the youths over the years will yield, at least a series of warped and distorted images reflecting back with the nightmarish quality of distorted mirrors in a carnival fun house. The re-evaluation of values will also create difficult challenges for maltreated youths in care. They will have learned early in life a number of powerful lessons such as *"might makes right"* and *"big people hurt and use smaller, weaker people."* Moral development depends to a significant degree on the presence of empathy and an awareness of the rules of society and social interactions within.

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I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live by the light that I have. I must stand with anybody that stands right, and stand with him while he is right, and part with him when he goes wrong.

Abraham Lincoln



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Youth who have not been treated with kindness will have difficulty with empathy, those who have lived in a series of environments with conflicting and confusing rules will not have internalized. Moreover, maltreated youths may have little or no reason to trust in adults, let alone absorb their values. Finally the life force that exuberant physical energy that carries many adolescents forward into adulthood may be stunted or at least minimized by earlier maltreatment. Many physically abused youths have lived so long with chronic pain that they do not know what it like to feel good years of emotional neglect may have left them depleted and exhausted, unable to bounce back from even the minor woes of adolescent life and impending adulthood. These effects of maltreatment on development and consequently on a youth's ability to master the skills needed for interdependence will of course be influenced by the youth's individual experiences. Specifically the age of onset, severity of maltreatment and relationship with the abusing adult will be vital factors in determining the effect of abuse or neglect. Equally important in mediating its effect are the ambivalent of support and nurturing from other adults, and the child's own constitutional or genetic qualities that may serve as a defense. Moreover in addition to the overall effect of maltreatment other consequences may result from specific types that are physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional neglect.

Consequences of Physical Abuse

Adolescents who have been physically abused may experience a variety of development blocks and difficulties exhibited in wide range of behaviors, any of which may impede as smooth transition to adult roles. Some abused youths may set up situations in which they will be scapegoat and punished, others develop patterns of being the aggression rather than the victim. Overt aggressive behavior often reflects the foster child's effort to escape from painful feelings, as well as identification with the aggressor. Some abused children have serious emotional problems with respect to self-concept, relationships with peers and adult attachment and the capacity to trust others.

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Anger and Fear

The abused child is both angry and fearful. If the youth who was abused as a child has not had the opportunity to resolve the anger, and fear, these feelings may perpetuate a cycle of acting out behavior that may provoke further retaliation by foster parents and others and present serious impediments to the achievement of lifestyles. Adolescents with a history of physical abuse face a constant struggle with anger and aggression. Much of their energy is spent in trying to keep the anger under control because of the earlier learned fear of the anger of others. If anger is extremely controlled, however it is turned inward resulting in depression or worse, potential suicide. Erupting outward the anger may take the form of aggression toward peers, adult authority or younger youths. It may carry over to adult behavior in future intimate relationships or parenting roles.

Consequences of Emotional Neglect

Physical abuse and sexual abuse are almost always accompanied by emotional abuse or neglect. Even when a child has not been physically abused, emotional neglect may be devastating. Indeed some research suggests that emotional neglect is potentially more damaging to development than abuse. The damage to development may be caused in great part by the inconsistent and negative parental attention that was part of the actual abuse. Parents who physically abuse a child frequently diminish a child's self-esteem with verbal abuse. Create an atmosphere of secrecy, fearful unpredictability, expect more than the child can ever accomplish set up a role reversal in which the child is supposed to nurture the adult and punish the child for normal expression of feelings. Thus the feelings of loss associated with abuse may be even more difficult to deal with them as with the bereavement following the death of a parent. Emotional neglect may not be solely the result of earlier abuse or rejection by biological parents. It may also represent the culmination of many traumatic moves within the child welfare system. The child who has been rejected by foster and or adoptive parents finds in adolescence that the earlier sense of loss from biological parents is intensified, thus the youth's self-blame and self-hatred by be reinforced. Institutional abuse by an ineffective foster care system may have included a shortage of appropriate placements, lack of treatment or misdiagnosis or actual physical or sexual abuse by foster parents or other caregivers. The system is often guilty of physical or medical neglect in its failure to provide adequate health care. Emancipating youths have often had a long succession of workers and have learned that even caring workers are busy and do not stay long at their jobs.



Conclusion:

Maltreated youths have issues that may surface and resurface throughout the life cycle as they reach new stages of development. The emotional effects of maltreatment, such as poor self-image or inability to trust, may impair the youth's later adult relationships and impinge on the achievement of life tasks. Social workers and foster parents must be prepared to continue their teamwork, advocating continuation to develop resources that meet the lifelong development needs of those former maltreated children. Perhaps the greatest single resource will be the committed foster parent who will remain emotionally available as the newly launched adult takes on the challenges of the life cycle. Workers and foster parents must become able to support each other with the hope that preparation youths received in foster care was sufficient to carry them forward into a future that is for all youth.

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