

The Cost of Child Abuse vs. the Cost of Child Abuse Prevention

Injuries and Health Problems:

The immediate health cost of injury, missing school, health care expense, etc. from child abuse had been factored to be over \$100 billion a year, nationwide. But recent studies are now showing there is a prolonged health cost well into adulthood, with markedly higher risk for diseases such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

Mental/Emotional Problems:

Depression, anxiety, psychiatric disorders and suicide attempts are just a few of the numerous problems that can result from childhood abuse. A person who experiences complex (severe) childhood traumas is 800 times more likely to attempt suicide as an adult than someone who was not abused.

Learning Problems:

Because the most rapid brain development in a person's life occurs in childhood, abuse and neglect can have an immediate and severe effect on learning and educational abilities.

Economic Costs:

The monetary cost of child abuse nationwide is estimated to be roughly \$258 million a day, nationwide. The cost of child abuse prevention is estimated to be roughly 1/19 the cost of health care, social services, court costs and other costs associated with child abuse.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse:

Children who are abused are more likely to have problems with alcohol and substance abuse, but these are also two of the biggest contributing factors to continuing the cycle of abuse. Children of substance-abusing parents are three times more likely to be abused than children of parents who do not abuse substances.

Teenage Pregnancy:

Child sexual abuse is shown to be a risk factor for teenage pregnancy, and teenage parents generally have a much higher rate for neglect and abuse themselves.

Homelessness:

Children make up the largest number of homeless Americans, and homeless children are much more likely to be abused. In addition, studies show that up to one third of homeless women were neglected as children.

The true cost of child abuse may never be known. There is an immediate injury whenever a child is abused or neglected, but the total cost is carried with the child well into adulthood.

Source: *Prevent Child Abuse, New York and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

is similar in magnitude for childhood maltreatment as it is for the traditional risk factors such as tobacco use. For example, experiencing physical neglect in childhood, by itself, increases the risk for heart disease decades later by 40 percent. This presents a slightly greater lifetime risk than smoking tobacco, which increases the risk by 30 percent.

Probably the most important, and novel, health discovery from the ACE study was that the more childhood traumas experienced, or more severe the traumas, resulted in even greater health problems, also called a "dose effect." Experiencing one type of abuse—for example, emotional abuse—was less of a risk for future health problems than—for example, emotional abuse and violence against the mother. The physical health risk of experiencing three types of abuse was greater than two, and so on.

The implications of these findings is great, as much of what is done now for major diseases is based on treating the symptom, not the root cause. Common diseases, such as heart disease, chronic lung disease, liver disease, skeletal fractures, sexually transmitted diseases and cancer, can now be linked to stressful childhood experiences. A relationship has been shown between the degree of trauma and the likelihood of acquiring unhealthy lifestyle habits including smoking, alcohol and illicit drug abuse, as well as mental health problems



such as depression, suicide attempts and problems with anger and anxiety.

Recent findings show early traumatic experiences can cause chronic stress to the body, in various ways, that over a long period of time increase risks. High levels of stress hormones, for instance, can weaken the immune system, leaving the person vulnerable to infection and chronic health problems. The findings are helping to refocus national attention toward preventing child abuse and neglect from ever happening.

By knowing that traumatic childhood experiences can be a root cause for these, steps must be taken to prevent abuse from happening in the first place. Major health problems could be stopped years, sometimes decades, before they would normally begin to show symptoms. If prevention efforts decreased the number of traumatic experiences a child underwent, for instance, from seven to three, this alone would cut the risk of suicide attempts later in life by about 600 percent, and the risk of heart disease by half. Findings of this kind dramatically demonstrate that any degree of success in preventing child abuse and neglect will have both large and long-term health benefits.

The Response and Connection to OHM

As one of the state's biggest health care providers to the Native Community, SCF has been working for years to combat and is committed to

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