

Ghosts & Angels in the Nursery: How Does Child Maltreatment Influence Caregiving in the Next Generation?

What is Child Maltreatment?

Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect of children ages 18 or younger. This includes neglect as well as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that may result in harm to the child's health and development.⁹



How Does Childhood Maltreatment Impact Parenting in the Next Generation?

- Parents' fears and emotional responses connected to their negative childhood experiences, known as "ghosts in the nursery," can invade the current parent-child relationship. When parents are brought back to how they felt physically and emotionally when they were mistreated, it can lead to insensitive parenting and maltreatment.⁷
- Parents with child maltreatment histories are at 3 times higher risk for maltreating their own children and may struggle to provide sensitive parenting to their children.¹
- Among parents who continue the abuse cycle, 1 in 3 will mistreat their child within their child's first year of life.⁵

What Can We Do? Breaking Cycles and Resilience

- Many adults with maltreatment histories have strong and healthy relationships with their own children. Factors that help break the "cycle of abuse" include:³⁻⁴
 - Supportive and trusting relationships with romantic partners
 - Social support and connection to your community
 - Stronger mental health, financial security, and lower overall stress⁶
- Many adults with maltreatment histories also have memories of love, acceptance and support from their childhoods, known as "angel memories" or "angels in the nursery." These positive memories provide parents with internal resources to help cope with parenting challenges and examples of positive experiences they can recreate with their children.⁷
- Supporting parents at risk for maltreating their children as early as possible, such as during pregnancy and postpartum, is key.

How to Find Support as a Parent

- There are several trauma-informed interventions that can help caregivers with maltreatment histories have healthy relationships with their children and improve their own mental health. These include:
 - Child Parent Psychotherapy
 - Parent-Child Interaction Therapy
 - Individual therapy with a trauma-informed therapist can help with processing difficult events experienced during childhood.
 - [Traumatherapistnetwork.com](https://www.traumatherapistnetwork.com) hosts a list of trauma-informed therapists.



- Social support is one of the strongest predictors of positive parenting in families facing difficulties.
 - Reach out to friends, family, and loved ones for help with emotional struggles and parenting challenges.
 - Seek out parent support groups. The US Department of Health and Human Services hosts a list of parent support programs [here](#).

Key References

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9. World Health Organization (2020). Child maltreatment. Retrieved August 30, 2022. [Link](#)
10. A full list of additional references can be found [here](#).
11. Lieberman, A.F., Ghosh Ippen, C., & Van Horn (2015). Don't hit my mommy: A manual for Child-Parent Psychotherapy with young children exposed to violence and other trauma, Second Edition. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.