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The Impact of Childhood Abuse on Moral Development

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### **The Impact of Childhood Abuse on Moral Development**

Moral development is a topic which has little research to accompany it. Although there is a lack of understanding of where and how children develop morals, there is clear evidence to support that abuse in any form against a child will impact the way they learn morality. Children who experience abuse will face the physical, emotional, and mental impacts which will all contribute to the way they develop. Children also learn behaviors and ideas from caretakers and when those who are supposed to protect them do not, children will become disordered on the ideas of right and wrong. Childhood is a unique and important time for the brain to absorb and form new ideas, but without a safe environment for children to grow and learn their brain will not mature to its full potential.

### **Moral Development**

Moral growth is a crucial part of a child's development. This leads to the age-old question of nature versus nurture. Is morality innate or learned, or is it both? Biological forces, social interactions, and experiences all contribute to the development of morality in a child. Theorist, such as Piaget and Kohlberg devoted much of their work to the study of moral development and how many factors of life alter a person's morals as they grow. Proper functioning and development of the brain, positive social interactions, and learning experiences all contribute to a child's accurate understanding of morals and values.

### **Biological Factors**

Morality, in a simple term, is a decision-making process of what is right and wrong. The process of deciding, however, is just as physical as it is mental. Morality requires the interaction of several regions of the brain because the process of moral reasoning is so thoughtful. The amygdala, medial prefrontal cortex, dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and the ventromedial

prefrontal cortex are just a few parts of the brain that are used to feel the emotions necessary for moral decisions. The human body also produces chemicals called neuromodulators that impact morality. Oxytocin and serotonin, both hormones, influence social behaviors and interactions such as trust, envy, and aggression (Our Brains, 2016).

### **Social Factors**

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist known for studying child development, would argue that social factors are crucial for moral development, specifically in children. Piaget believed that from approximately 5 to 9 years of age children experience heteronomous morality. Socially this stage is important because it emphasizes a child's experiences with authority figures. Children believe in the heteronomous stage that rules and laws are made by authorities and if they are broken there will be punishment. Children at this stage have no sense of moral realism, or the motives behind a person's actions. The important switch that children will begin to make around ages 9 to 10 is from experiencing heteronomous morality to autonomous morality. Once children have grasped the concept of moral realism, they will begin to transition to moral relativism. Socially, children will begin to understand other's moral values and will consider other's intentions behind their actions. Children will begin to realize that there is no definitive right or wrong and will begin to learn from others to make their own judgements on morality (Piaget's Theory, 2015).

One study found that autonomous morality can be experienced earlier than Piaget originally suggested. The study found that children can begin to understand other's intentions behind their actions and understand their own idea of morality by the time they have entered preschool. This study suggests that as soon as children have the chance to socialize with peers they can begin to interact and develop social awareness, which is key to proper moral

development. Children are also more likely to practice moral understanding with their peers first before practicing with an adult (Ruffly, 1981).

### **Personal Morals**

Children learn morals similar to the way they learn everything else, through careful observation and example. Most children are taught morals by their parents or other adults such as their teachers. When children are told not to lie or begin to understand that their bad actions have consequences, they begin to understand morality. When children experience different types of abuse their idea of morals and right from wrong becomes polluted with what they are experiencing. Children follow the examples set before them and children who experience abuse develop poor values or simply lack morals in general. One study found that children who have even witnessed abuse as a child, compared to those who did not, are 24 times more likely to commit sexual assault crimes, 50 times more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, 74 times more likely to commit a crime against another person, and 6 times more likely to commit suicide (Effects of Abuse on Children, 2010). Experiencing and even witnessing abuse can greatly impact the way a child develops morals.

### **Experience**

Arguably one of the most important contributors to moral development is a person's life experiences, and more specifically adverse life experiences. Children who have experienced different forms of maltreatment and abuse are more likely to have delayed or irregular brain development. As previously mentioned, the brain is where morals and decision making are processed, and many parts of the brain must work together for the best outcome. When a child is abused their brain is physically altered; the amygdala and prefrontal cortex can have reduced volume, and stress regulators such as the amygdala can begin to overreact causing cortisol levels

to rise. Adverse experiences alter the body's ability to regulate stress responses such as "fight or flight" and can impair the decision-making process and understanding of morals and values. Different types of abuse each have a unique impact on the way a person forms and practices morals (Understanding the Effects, 2015).

### **Impacts of Abuse**

At least 1 in 7 children have experienced abuse and/or neglect in the last year and this number, unfortunately, is probably an underestimate (Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect, 2019). Although early childhood is the most vital time for development, it is also the most vulnerable time for abuse and neglect. Last year, child abuse reports involved 7.5 million children (Child Abuse Statistics, 2018). Abuse puts strain and stress on the brain. Just like if a child is malnourished, they will not meet physical growth markers, when a child's brain and body are maltreated, they will not meet mental development markers. If the brain is not given the proper environment and resources necessary to develop it simply will not develop correctly.

### **Physical**

28.3% of children experience physical abuse globally making it the most common form of abuse against children (Childhood Abuse Statistics, n.d.). The National Child Traumatic Stress Network defines physical abuse against a child as, "when a parent or caregiver commits an act that results in physical injury to a child or adolescent, such as red marks, cuts, welts, bruises, muscle sprains, or broken bones, even if the injury was unintentional" (Peterson, 2018). One study found that children who have experienced both mental and physical abuse find it easier to classify physical abuse as morally incorrect, but it is more difficult to make that distinction with mental abuse. Although physical abuse against a child leaves lasting impacts on their body's, the emotional and moral impact are just as significant (Smetana, Kelly, & Twentyman, 1984).

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, the founder and CEO of the Center for Youth Wellness in San Francisco, wrote a book called *The Deepest Well* on adverse childhood experiences including physical abuse. Dr. Harris describes the impact abuse has on the stress response system in our bodies and how draining this can be when this stress response is triggered multiple times in a child's life. The amygdala and prefrontal cortex are impacted by this continual response to stress and will eventually begin to over-respond to all stress or not develop correctly (Harris, 2018). These parts of the brain are crucial for abstract thinking such as reasoning and values, without these pieces functioning properly children will not be able to take the time to even consider morals and begin to make impulse reactions before processing their situations.

### **Sexual**

Sexual abuse entails more than just experiences of molestation or rape, adverse experiences such as physical and emotional abuse all play a part in sexual abuse. Sexual abuse can significantly impact a child's brain as it develops. For example, the development of the cortex of the brain can be stunted by sexual abuse in early childhood. The cortex of the brain is where processes such as decision-making and analytical abilities take place, without proper development of this portion of the brain these processes will not develop either. To be able to process information and make informed, thoughtful, and somewhat emotional decisions are key to having morals.

Proper growth of the brain is not the only impact sexual abuse has on the brain; the regulation of certain hormones can also play a key role in a child's morality. Cortisol is an important hormone for the body's response to stressors. A child who has experienced sexual abuse is more likely to release excessive amounts of cortisol in stressful situations causing impulse decisions to be made, impairing a child's ability to analyze their morals before making a

decision. Sexual abuse can also cause a child's brain to release a reduced amount of positive chemicals such as serotonin and dopamine which can lead to depression and bouts of aggravation (Effects of Child Abuse, 2016).

Teenagers and young adults who experienced sexual abuse as a child are more likely to make impulsive and harmful decisions. Impaired moral reasoning can lead to decisions that are harmful to a person and the people they come in contact with. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse are 4 times more likely to develop some form of substance abuse (such as drugs or alcohol), 4 times more likely to experience PTSD which can impair proper stress response in the brain, and about 3 times more likely to experience depressive episodes which can lead to self-harm and suicide (Children and Teens, 2019). Without proper moral development there is a lack of value for self and others.

### **Emotional**

Emotional abuse can be the most difficult form to understand and identify, yet it has a large amount of impact on a child's ability to develop and understand morality. Emotional abuse can be seen in many forms such as rejection, isolation, verbal assault, and ignoring. Corruption is one of the most influential forms of emotional abuse on a child's moral development.

Corruption, usually through an adult instilling their negative morals and values in a child, can lead to destructive behaviors and inappropriate social interactions from a child. Emotional abuse, similar to other forms of abuse, can cause issues during brain development where certain areas do not develop correctly. The underdevelopment of the cerebral cortex can cause a child to experience a lack of value of themselves and others and impact a child's ability to feel and experience empathy. Children who experience emotional abuse are less likely to understand other's intentions behind their actions and proper moral reasoning (Child Emotional Abuse, n.d.).



### **Spiritual Development**

Spirituality plays an important role in many people's understanding of morals. For example, Christians have a written code of moral conduct called the Ten Commandments. Buddhists believe in karma which discourages doing wrong against others because it will always come back to oneself. Children who are abused are likely to drift away from spirituality and religion due to the trauma they have experienced. Without spirituality as a basis for a person to develop values and right from wrong, morals will not be as important. James Garbarino, a professor at Loyola University, was the first to study child trauma and its correlation to spirituality. Garbarino's study found that childhood trauma and abuse is a "reverse religious experience". Abuse serves to strip a child of their core meaningfulness and value, ultimately undermining their view of the worth of others and themselves (Garbarino & Bedard, 1996). Because children who experience trauma often cannot find answers for why they were abused they turn away from spirituality and hinder their opportunity to create a concrete understanding of their personal morals.

### **Conclusion**

Abuse against children reaches across all socioeconomic levels and class status. All children have the opportunity to grow and develop their idea of morality, but this process cannot happen for a child without the right learning environment. Those who are supposed to care for children and help children to learn values tend to be the ones who impact them the most. Often times, the perpetrator of child abuse is the person a child trusts the most such as a babysitter, family friend, and parent (Perpetrators of Child Abuse, n.d.). This perverse version of protection and relationships for a child can have the most impact on their morality. Making decisions, whether they are virtuous or not, is hard for many adults let alone a child. Experiencing and

witnessing abuse can physically change a child's brain and hormones, causing children to recklessly make decisions and not process ideas. Morality is a lifelong learning process, but that process should be positive and impactful to a person, especially a child, without unnecessary adverse experiences.

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