Children, by nature, are a vulnerable group. They are physically, socially, emotionally, and financially dependent on adults for sustenance, shelter, and survival. The field of psychology has used case studies -- the likes of Genie (Rymer, 1994) and the Wild Boy of Aveyron (a.k.a. Victor; BBC Radio, 2008; Lane, 1977) -- to highlight the harmful developmental effects of neglect and abuse when parents and/or caregivers fail to meet a child’s basic needs.

Both national and international legislation recognize children as a vulnerable population. Domestically, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA; 2010) defines child abuse as “any recent act of a parent which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (Section 3). Similarly, CAPTA defines neglect as a failure to meet the child’s basic needs, such as (1) sufficient food, shelter or basic supervision, (2) necessary medical or mental health treatment, (3) adequate education, and/or (4) appropriate emotional comfort. Under this federal law, children are protected against these forms of abuse and neglect.

International leaders and governments have similarly recognized the rights of children in their countries. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC or UNCRC; 2009) is a human rights treaty that identifies specific rights of children. Under the CRC, children
are entitled to certain civil, political, economic, social, health, and cultural rights. The CRC also states that leaders of nations are responsible for protecting children from physical or mental violence, abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation, or sexual abuse (Articles 19 and 34), as well as promoting recovery for child victims of neglect, exploitation, and abuse (Article 39). These are basic human rights of children across the globe. However, there is variability between countries in how this treaty is enforced.

When young children are not provided stable, predictable, loving, and supportive environments, significant developmental consequences often follow. As shown by the case studies of Victor and Genie, child victims of severe abuse and neglect may exhibit a lack of language acquisition or basic communication skills, an inability to relate to others, and/or impaired or delayed motor development. The detrimental effects of violence or deprivation in infancy and early childhood may have long term consequences that can be irreversible. Such tragic stories of neglect and abuse are still common today (Perry & Szalavitz, 2007).

Risks and Consequences of Child Abuse

How has psychology contributed to the scientific study of violence towards children? Empirical research across communities, countries, and cultures has identified a plethora of negative outcomes for children who experience abuse and neglect. Physical and/or medical problems are common, such as neurological and musculoskeletal delays, respiratory difficulties, cardiovascular disease, and gastrointestinal and metabolic disorders (e.g., Wegman & Stetler, 2009). Experiencing abuse and neglect can also result in psychological and emotional problems, such as early onset depressive and anxiety disorders (e.g., Scott et al., 2011), adult attachment problems (e.g., Unger & Luca, 2014), and attention problems (e.g., Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2008).
Additionally, violence begets violence. Children may be victims or witnesses to violent incidents, such as domestic violence, inter-group violence, human trafficking, warfare, and genital mutilation, to name a few. In turn, these children are likely to continue the cycle of violence (e.g., Fagen, 2005; Sabri, Hong, Campbell, & Cho, 2013), as posited by social learning theory, which demonstrates that children learn to imitate the behavior of adults (e.g., Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). If community members perpetuate violence against children or in the presence of children, children learn that violence is acceptable and become more likely to engage in it themselves. Violence not only impacts psychological development, but also community sustainability by depleting the emotional and physical resources necessary to successfully compete in a global economy.

Is Child Abuse Sensitive to Culture?

There exist many differing conceptions of what does and does not constitute child abuse (see Runyan et al., 2005 for a review). Is leaving a 10 year-old home alone neglect? What about a 5 year-old? Is spanking physical abuse? What if it leaves a bruise? Should a brother and a sister bathe together? There are many variables to consider when operationalizing child abuse, including but not limited to age, quality, frequency, and type. In light of this variability, psychologists and other social scientists have recognized that child abuse may be culturally-specific, and consequently what constitutes abuse may vary between different cultures.

For example, anthropologists Bril and Sabatier (1986) studied how cultural variation in parenting practices affects infant motor development. Mothers in the Bambara culture of Mali were found to be “very physical” with their infants to employ rather “aggressive” massage and manipulation in early infancy, such as stretching exercises that involved dangling an infant by one of his or her arms. Although such practices would be seen as unusual, or even abusive, in
most Western cultures, these mother-infant interactions were standardized by the mothers in the community.

Other researchers have since found that these physically aggressive parenting practices may benefit early motor development. In one experiment, infants who received 15 minutes of daily enhanced motor experiences with a caregiver over a one year period developed locomotion and gross motor skills earlier than a control group who did not receive these motor experiences (Lobo & Galloway, 2008). These examples illustrate how the same practice can be evaluated differently between cultures, and how empirical research can illuminate the tangible benefits or detriments of such practices.

**It Takes a Village…**

Policy makers recognize that children have basic rights to food, shelter, love, and a safe environment. Efforts are being made globally to ensure that children grow up in environments that are free from abuse, neglect, and violence (e.g., ACT Raising Safe Kids Program, 2014). These universal efforts to ensure the well-being of children worldwide are undoubtedly necessary. Still, one must consider the extent to which these political agendas and policies should also be sensitive to cultural values, norms, and expectations. To help guide these efforts, it will be imperative to have an improved understanding of the consequences, both positive and negative, of various parenting practices. Community members, researchers, and policy makers must collaborate to identify and consider cultural norms and differences of child-rearing in research and in policy. It not only takes a village to raise a child, it also takes a village to understand a child.
References


