

OVERVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Children are our most important resource for our future. However, as violence and other types of trauma impact their lives, their health, happiness, and eventual ability to function productively as adults are at great risk. Unfortunately, childhood violence and trauma are increasingly more rampant in the world. As a result, the lives of youths can be unpredictable and dangerous beyond their ability to cope physically, mentally and emotionally.

More specifically, what are violence and trauma? The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “violence” as:

“The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group that either results in (or has a high likelihood of resulting in) injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. Violence is caused by many factors at the individual, interpersonal, family, community and societal levels.” *(WHO Global Consultation on Violence and Health)*

According to the (U.S.) National Institute of Mental Health, “trauma” has both a medical and a psychiatric definition. Medically, trauma refers to a serious or critical bodily injury, wound, or shock. Psychiatric trauma, or emotional harm, is essentially a normal response to an extreme event. It involves the creation of emotional memories about the distressful event that are stored in structures deep within the brain. Generally, experts believe, the more direct the exposure to the traumatic event, the higher the risk for emotional harm. However, even secondhand exposure to violence can be traumatic.

Trauma and violence take many shapes and forms that shatter children’s sense of security. According to Esther Giller, president and director of The Sidran Traumatic Stress Institute, traumatic experiences can be divided into distinct categories: “single or repeated blows” and “natural or human-made”. Single-blow traumas are one-time occurrences such as natural disasters and criminal violence. As traumatic as these are, prolonged and repeated traumatic experiences tend to result in more serious mental health problems. How extensive is the problem of child violence and trauma? The statistics are alarming:

- According to the International Society for Traumatic Stress, between 14 percent and 43 percent of children have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime.
- The International Save the Children Alliance states that 20 million children have been forced from their homes by war and over 4 million children have been disabled by armed conflict or political violence.
- Studies on the levels of violence on television showed that 7.5 violent acts per hour on US prime time TV, 8.6 for German entertainment programs, 5.8 for Dutch dramatic fiction and 2.5 for UK prime time TV. A US child watching 2-4 hours per day (the norm) will have witnessed 8,000 homicides and 100,000 other acts of violence by age 18. *(Wave, Media Influence on Young People)*
- A UNICEF report on the State of the World’s Children says that in the 1990s, 2 million children were killed, 6 million were seriously injured or permanently disabled, and 12 million were left homeless. In addition, during

“To look into some aspects of the future, we do not need projections by supercomputers. Much of the next millennium can be seen in how we care for our children today. Tomorrow’s world may be influenced by science and technology, but more than anything, it is already taking shape in the bodies and minds of our children.”

Kofi Annan
Secretary-General
United Nations

“The future of our children lies in the leadership and the choices leaders make. We call on those we have called on before to join us in a new global partnership that is committed to change. We invite those whom we have never met to join us in the global movement for children”

Nelson Mandela
former president
South Africa

the last decade of the 20th century, more than 1 million children were orphaned or separated from their families.

- WHO (*Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention*) reports that 40 million children under age 15 are subject to abuse and neglect each year.
- According to the Johnson & Johnson Pediatric Institute, half of the population of any refugee setting is under age 15.
- In the United States, the National Center for Children Exposed to Violence provides these statistics on children and exposure to violence:
 - Child abuse occurs in 30 percent to 60 percent of family violence cases that involve families with children.
 - About 4 million adolescents have been victims of serious physical assault, and 9 million have witnessed serious violence.

Although the adult world has begun to notice and to protect the rights of children, it is still very far from the goal of a world free from trauma and violence against its youngest citizens. The World Federation for Mental Health has longstanding interests in this area. It was founded in 1948 during a wave of international pacifism after World War II, at a time when the consequences of violence were much in evidence. From that time onwards the Federation has been concerned with human rights, the needs of refugees, and conflict resolution. Over time its interests have grown to include special issues relevant to children, such as responsible parenthood, attention to the mental health of infants, and involvement in campaigns against child labor and against the sexual exploitation of children.

This year the Federation would like to draw attention to the way violence impairs the development of children in the modern world. Our theme for 2002 is The Effects of Trauma and Violence on Children and Adolescents. We have gathered together some of the material that has recently become available on the subject, with suggestions for ways that individuals can take action to give children a safer future. The information presented here is just a starting point, and we urge you to use it as the beginning of a broad examination of the subject. We will present additional resources on the WFMH web site at www.wfmh.org during the year.

A PLAN OF ACTION

Despite the prevalence of the problem, there is hope. A dual approach is needed:

1. We must work diligently to prevent violence and trauma from occurring in the first place, and
2. We must intervene quickly and effectively when children are exposed to violence and trauma.

Because violence and trauma result from a multitude of factors, collaboration across various sectors of society is essential. Key collaborative strategies include:

Educating families and the community

The attitudes of family and community may help moderate the effects of trauma by helping the child express feelings and better understand the situation. Most children are deeply affected by the reactions of their parents and caregivers. By teaching parents and teachers how to react to traumatic events, we can help children.

Providing effective interventions

Teachers, police and mental health professionals can significantly affect the speed of children's recovery from violence and trauma. Early intervention by emergency care workers can also be highly beneficial.

Uniting internationally to prevent violence and trauma

Many global human rights organizations are taking steps to deal with situations that cause child trauma. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a treaty that recognizes the dignity of children, is now the most widely ratified treaty in the world. New optional protocols that ban the sale and sexual exploitation of children and their use in armed conflict are gaining signatures in several countries. Please see the following pages for more detailed information on the CRC.

For more detailed information on these and other strategies, see section 2.

We thank you for your advocacy efforts and look forward to working with you to make a safer and healthier world for our children a reality.