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Letter to the Editor: Child behavior/mental health conditions and abuse: which causes which?

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Child Abuse; Neglect; Behavior Problems; Disabilities; Mental Health

As a developmental pediatrician, I was interested to read the article, “Do chronic conditions increase young children’s risk of being maltreated?” (Jaude & Mackey-Bilaver, 2008). Behavioral and mental health conditions in children, more so than physical or cognitive disabilities, were associated with an increased risk of child abuse and neglect. Although the authors focused on the behavioral disorder as a risk factor for maltreatment, and attempted to adjust for prior maltreatment, in my mind the question still remains: which causes which?

There is an abundance of evidence from both human and animal studies to indicate that chronic maltreatment alters brain development and behavior in the offspring (Glaser, 2000; Strathearn, Gray, O’Callaghan & Wood, 2001; Trickett & Bride-Chang, 1995). Non-human primates experiencing maternal abuse in infancy, for example, are more likely to be anxious and dependent in childhood (McCormack, Sanchez, Bardi & Maestripieri, 2006), more aggressive, and show an exaggerated physiological stress response (Maestripieri, Lindell, Ayala, Gold & Higley, 2005). Likewise, human infants who experience insecure attachment relationships and psychosocial adversity are more likely to display impulsive and inattentive behavior (Fearon & Belsky 2004), as well as other behavioral problems (Belsky & Fearon, 2002).

Unfortunately, I feel that the present study, while still providing valuable data, was unable to demonstrate the direction of causality between behavior/mental health problems and maltreatment. Although the authors classified maltreatment by the age of first substantiated report, children reported after the age of 3 may still have been exposed to maltreatment prior to this time. Thus, the important question of “which causes which?” is left unanswered.

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