

Save the mother, save the child: Disrupting the cycle of intergenerational child abuse and neglect

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83% of child abuse are children of mothers with a history of child protection contact. Credit: Unsplash

Supporting female survivors of childhood maltreatment is critical to

disrupting intergenerational abuse as new research from the University of South Australia shows a clear link between parents who have suffered abuse and the likelihood of their children suffering the same fate.

The finding amplifies an acute need for far better support for victims of child [maltreatment](#) to ensure safer and more nurturing environments for all children.

Funded by the NHMRC and the Channel 7 Children's Research Foundation, and published in *The Lancet Public Health* today, the study found that most child maltreatment is occurring among families caught up in intergenerational cycles of child abuse and neglect—83 percent of the cases of substantiated child maltreatment were the children of mothers with a history of child protection contact.

The study showed that 30 percent of the children of mothers with substantiated maltreatment as a child were also the subject of substantiated maltreatment (by age 12). In comparison, for children of mothers with no history of child protection contact, the rate of substantiated abuse was five percent.

The study quantified the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment in South Australia using a large linked data set from the internationally recognised iCAN study, which included 38,556 mother-child pairs—some of whom had experienced abuse and some who had not—based on SA child protection data.

The children of mothers exposed to substantiated maltreatment and removal into out-of-home care were at greatest risk of child maltreatment, with 14 times the risk of experiencing substantiated maltreatment, and 26 times the risk of being removed, reflecting extreme child protection concerns.

Lead Investigator, UniSA's Professor Leonie Segal, says the findings highlight the urgent need to do more to help these children and families—from early in life into adulthood—not just for their own well-being, but also as an intervention opportunity to protect their unborn children and future generations.

"The results are especially concerning given the generally poor outcomes for victims of child abuse or neglect across multiple health and social domains," Prof Segal says.

"Abused children often grow into adults with poor impulse control, a heightened sense of shame, an over-alertness to threat, easily triggered, with extreme levels of distress that can result in early substance use and mental illness, compounding harms.

"When these children become parents, their capacity for compassion or trust can be impaired, they often cannot see the needs of their own children, and can find it extremely difficult to provide the nurturing parenting that they would so want to offer.

"Our results are consistent with well-described biological mechanisms for intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, through the lasting impacts of assault or neglect, altered [brain development](#) and disturbed relational patterning, strongly suggesting the observed associations are causal, and at least partly preventable.

"Children and parents need help. Healing their trauma is an ethical imperative, but also offers large health and economic payoffs to families and the wider community.

"The increased risk of child [abuse](#) and neglect among children whose mothers have experienced maltreatment themselves as children, is extreme and too significant to ignore—and they are already known to the

service system.

"If only we could disrupt the intergenerational transmission pathway, we could prevent the lion's share of [child maltreatment](#) and turn around the life trajectories of our most vulnerable [children](#) and offer protection to future generations."

Provided by University of South Australia

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