

Study explains why some childhood abuse victims develop certain mental illnesses

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Children who are physically or sexually abused are at greater risk for developing mental health problems later in life, but the severity of these problems may depend on the time that abuse first began, how long it lasted and the severity of abuse, according to a new study from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The study, published in *Child Abuse and Neglect*, suggests that abuse occurring in children age 5 or older may have the most harmful impact on mental health.

"Our study provides valuable insight into the unique [mental health](#) effects of the various dimensions of [abuse](#), including when it began, how long it happened and how severe the abuse was," said Jonathan Adams, a graduate research assistant in the UAB Department of Psychology and lead author on the study. "Identifying the effects of abuse could help parents and professionals know how to deal with the ramifications and look for signs of [mental health problems](#) as the child ages."

Researchers from the UAB College of Arts and Sciences interviewed adolescents and emerging adults who self-reported the onset, duration and

severity of physical and [sexual abuse](#) alongside symptoms of depression, anxiety and [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

The study indicated that children ages 6 to 12 who are physically or sexually abused are more likely to develop symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD. Children age 13 or older who are sexually abused are also more likely to experience symptoms of depression, anxiety and PTSD later in life, and those physically abused at this age were more likely to experience PTSD symptoms. Females who experienced sexual abuse suffered more detrimental effects than males.

"In the future, we need to look at other types of childhood adversities and evaluate a broader set of abuse characteristics to further determine the effects of abuse on mental health," said Sylvie Mrug, Ph.D., chair of the UAB Department of Psychology and senior author on the study. "We also need to develop better strategies to protect children and adolescents from physical and sexual abuse."

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

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