

Although intergenerational abuse is a major risk factor, parents who were not abused as children can still become abusive due to a complex combination of psychological, social, and situational factors. Many parents who abuse their children may not even recognize their own harmful behaviors.

Psychological factors

- **Mental health conditions:** Untreated mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, or personality disorders, can impair a parent's judgment and emotional regulation.
- **Poor impulse control:** A parent with poor impulse control may lash out in anger or frustration without considering the consequences, leading to physical or emotional harm to a child.
- **Unrealistic expectations:** Some parents have a poor understanding of child development. They may expect behavior from their children that is beyond their age and ability, leading to frustration and abusive tactics.
- **Low self-esteem:** Insecurities and low self-confidence can contribute to controlling or emotionally abusive behavior. A parent with low self-esteem may belittle a child to feel more powerful.
- **Projection and misplaced anger:** A parent may displace their anger and frustration from other aspects of their life—such as financial problems, job issues, or relationship conflicts—onto their children.

Social and situational factors

- **Isolation and lack of support:** Parents who feel isolated from family, friends, and their community may struggle with the demands of parenting. Without a support system, stress can build to an overwhelming level.
- **Stress:** High levels of stress from financial pressures, job worries, or a family crisis increase the risk of child maltreatment.
- **Substance abuse:** Alcohol or drug addiction impairs a parent's judgment and ability to meet a child's needs, often increasing the likelihood of rage or neglect.
- **Domestic violence:** Exposure to intimate partner violence in the home is a major risk factor for a parent becoming abusive. A parent who witnesses or is a victim of abuse may normalize violent behavior.
- **Lack of parenting skills:** A parent who has not learned healthy discipline or emotional regulation skills may rely on excessive and abusive tactics.

The myth of the cycle of abuse

It is a misconception that all abused children become abusive parents. In fact, most people who were maltreated as children do not go on to abuse their own children. However, a history of abuse is a significant risk factor. Many individuals who experience abuse as children become what is known as a "transitional character," meaning they actively work to end the cycle of abuse with their own children.