



Review

Research progress on the current status of and interventions for psychological abuse and neglect in childhood

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Abstract: Childhood neglect, as a common risk factor in the process of individual growth, has many adverse consequences, and it is also a hot topic of research in recent years. This article reviews the relevant research on childhood neglect at home and abroad, summarizes the concepts, influencing factors and intervention strategies of childhood psychological abuse and neglect, and provides an important reference for the prevention and treatment of childhood psychological abuse and neglect.

Keywords: psychological maltreatment; children; neglect; risk factors; intervention.

The Healthy China 2030 Plan issued by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council emphasizes that by 2030, the mental health literacy level of residents will be increased to 30%^[1]. It can be seen that improving the mental health literacy of the whole population has become a major topic of concern to the country and the people. Children and adolescents are the future of the country, and their mental health is directly related to the long-term development of the country and social stability. However, the mental health status of adolescents and children in China is not impressive^[2]. Studies have shown that Child Psychological Abuse and Neglect (CPAN) has a significant impact on children's psychosocial development and mental health, not only increasing the risk of chronic physical and mental health problems throughout the life cycle of abused individuals^[3], but also increasing health care costs, productivity loss, and economic burden at the social level. Therefore, it is of great practical significance to study the current situation and interventions of psychological abuse and neglect in childhood. At present, most of the research focuses on physical abuse and sexual abuse in child abuse, and compared with foreign countries, the research on psychological abuse and neglect in China started late, and more localized research is urgently needed to provide a basis for policy formulation.

Therefore, this paper reviews the research progress on the definition, epidemiological status, adverse effects and risk factors of childhood psychological abuse and neglect, in order to provide a scientific basis for the intervention measures to improve child protection, so as to promote the improvement of mental health literacy of adolescents and children in China and achieve the goal of "Healthy China 2030".

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1. Definition of psychological abuse and neglect in childhood

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that childhood psychological abuse and neglect is a major public health problem worldwide. Child abuse includes sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect, and the concept of emotional abuse is interchangeable with psychological abuse^[4]. Psychological abuse and neglect are suggestive, more difficult to monitor, and most devastating than other forms of abuse, and are more likely to have serious and often debilitating long-term consequences for psychosocial development and physical and mental health^[5].

However, for a long time, the definition of psychological abuse and neglect has not been harmonized. The United States Academy of Pediatrics defines psychological abuse as caregiver behavior that negatively affects a child's cognitive, social, emotional, or physical development, including neglect of the need for social interaction or spitting or intimidating the child, which may be verbal or nonverbal, active or passive, with or without intent to harm^[6]. Psychological neglect is considered to be the most common manifestation of child injury due to caregivers' neglect of their responsibilities and obligations to care for children, and their failure to meet the child's basic emotional and psychological needs, including the satisfaction of love, belonging, and support, to the detriment of the child's health or development^[7]. Chinese scholar Pan Chen et al. define childhood psychological abuse and neglect as the continuous or repeated behavior of parents or primary caregivers against children, including but not limited to verbal abuse, intimidation, belittling, connivance, and psychological neglect, although psychological abuse and neglect do not involve physical and sexual contact with children, but are the most destructive forms of abuse^[8].

2. Epidemiology of psychological abuse and neglect in childhood

According to the World Health Organization's 2020 Global Status Report on Preventing Violence against and Responding to Child Abuse, 16 percent of children worldwide experience abuse and neglect^[9]. Psychological abuse and neglect is highest among child abused populations, with an average incidence of 22 to 60 percent abroad^[10,11]. Studies have shown that boys are more likely than girls to develop dark personalities in the sex ratio of child psychological abuse and neglect, which may be related to the greater emphasis on male independence in society^[12]. Domestic studies have found that the incidence of psychological abuse and neglect in childhood ranges from 21% to 45%^[13], and 76.46% of individuals reported that they experienced psychological neglect in childhood^[14]. It can be seen that the phenomenon of psychological abuse and neglect is widespread in China, and the incidence of psychological neglect is more significant.

3. Risks and protective factors of psychological abuse and neglect in childhood

Scholars at home and abroad have pointed out that the risk factors of children's psychological abuse and neglect include environmental factors and children's own aspects, and the risk of psychological abuse and protective factors for children are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Risk and protective factors for psychological abuse and neglect in childhood

Source	Risk factors	Protective factors
Children	Young age Attention deficit Mental retardation Emotional/behavioural problems (mischievous, disobedient, fighting, etc.) Long-term boarding school Highly dependent on others sickly Physical disability/abnormal physical characteristics Poor presentation skills premature birth Not born within the planned schedule The home must not be spoiled/unwanted or parental expectations not met Personality traits (introversion, low self-esteem, irritability, feelings of weakness, etc.)	Above-average cognitive abilities Believe in your own ability to take charge of your own destiny External attribution Good impulse control High self-esteem or sense of self-worth There is spirituality
Family factors	Poor impulse control Left-behind families Parents are under constant pressure Families with many children It is difficult to build a close relationship with a child Single-parent, divorced, foster family Substance abuse/alcoholism/mother smoking/involved in criminal activity Long-term care by the father Young parents Intimate partner violence Have a history of child abuse Depression or other psychiatric disorders Lack of awareness of children, negative perceptions of normal children's behavior Low-income families Low level of education Creating unrealistic expectations of your child	Caregiver resilience Caregiver social support networks are present with concerned or supportive adults
School and social factors	Social support is inadequate Peer-to-peer relationships Lack of counselling help and legal assistance School violence Gender / social inequality	Access to good health, education and social welfare services Caring adults at school or in extracurricular activities

Teacher Values	Get involved in extracurricular activities or hobbies Orderly social and school environment
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In terms of children's own characteristics, children are more likely to be psychologically abused and neglected by their young age^[15], low self-esteem, high dependence on others, boys, and children with physical disabilities or abnormal physical characteristics^[16]. Multiple siblings and preterm infants also increase the risk of psychological abuse and neglect in infants and young children^[17]. Children's above-average cognitive ability, optimism, self-confidence, and external attribution can act as a protective buffer against the adverse consequences of psychological abuse and neglect in children^[18].

From the perspective of children's living environment, it includes family factors, social factors and school factors. Children raised by parents or caregivers who have psychological problems such as substance or alcohol abuse, poor emotional control, and depression are at greater risk of psychological abuse and neglect. Caregivers who have a history of psychological abuse in childhood, and their own children are also vulnerable to psychological abuse, will also increase the probability of children inflicting abuse on the child's next generation in their lives, forming an intergenerational transmission^[19]. Maternal smoking, unmarried mothers^[20], and parents not living together at birth or leaving children in foster care or orphanage care are also important factors in psychological abuse and neglect^[21]. In addition, children from single-parent families^[22], young parents, living in poverty, domestic violence^[19], poor parenting levels, psychological alienation from parents, and unstable family relationships are at higher risk of abuse^[23, 24]. Parents who are young and poorly educated can lead to a lack of life experience and a relatively weak ability to understand children's psychological development and parenting practices. Secondly, the lack of social support in the family, the disharmony in the relationship between peers, school violence and the incorrect values of teachers are all prone to psychological abuse and neglect of children.

4. The adverse effects of psychological abuse and neglect in childhood

According to attachment theory, parent-child relationships have a profound impact on social-emotional development^[25]. In the normal developmental model, the parent-child relationship plays a role in buffering stress, but in the family environment of psychological abuse and neglect, it is difficult for children to develop a secure attachment style, which impairs their interpersonal and social skills, and thus induces internalized and externalized psychological and behavioral problems^[26].

4.1 Internalizing disorders

Psychological abuse and neglect are effective predictors of adolescent internalization problems and developmental disabilities. Tomoda^[27] found that childhood abuse and neglect are psychopathological risk factors, affecting the development of specific brain regions such as the hippocampus and amygdala, and further affecting cognitive and emotional function. A longitudinal study of 2156 secondary school students by Ye^[28] showed that neglect had the greatest impact on adolescent anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, followed by

psychological abuse. Yi^[29] found that psychological abuse and neglect in childhood directly affect the subjective well-being of college students, and indirectly affect the well-being through the mediating effect of social support ability and anxiety. Studies have shown that compared with individuals who have not experienced psychological abuse and neglect, children who have experienced psychological abuse and neglect feel that they are "worthless, defective, unloved, undesirable, or only valuable in meeting the needs of others," have low self-identity and self-efficacy, have poor emotional regulation in the face of negative events, and are unable to engage in cognitive restructuring, ultimately leading to increased internalizing symptoms^[30]. It has even been found that the high psychological abuse and neglect group is more likely to develop suicidal ideation than the low abuse group, and indirectly predicts suicidal ideation through depression or hope^[28].

4.2 Externalizing obstacles

Psychological abuse and neglect have an important impact on adolescent externalization. Externalizing problems specifically refer to destructive or harmful behaviors directed at others or the external environment^[31], mainly including mobile phone addiction behaviors, antisocial tendencies, malicious creativity, self-injurious behaviors, and intergenerational transmission. Children who have experienced psychological abuse and neglect often attribute their problems to the outside world, and when they do have problems, they blame others and blame them. For example, being more aggressive towards peers, remaining socially isolated^[33], or seeking compensation through media such as mobile phone networks. When individuals suffer more psychological abuse and neglect, they are prone to loneliness and insecurity, and tend to establish emotional connections with mobile phones to compensate for the need for security and attachment, which in turn leads to addiction. Some scholars have studied the link between psychological abuse and neglect and mobile phone addiction among college students, and found that the correlation between the two is significant^[32]. In a study of 1933 junior high school students in urban eastern China, childhood trauma significantly predicted externalization in adolescents^[33]. These problems have an important impact on adolescents' poor academic performance, interpersonal conflict, and risk of dropping out of school, and also increase the incidence of problems such as poor future quality of life, health problems, low life satisfaction, family dysfunction, antisocial personality disorder, and criminal behavior, resulting in long-term personal and social costs^[33, 34]. Liu^[35] compared battered patients with normal groups and found that abused individuals were more likely to exhibit personality disorders such as paranoia, narcissism, borderline, obsessiveness, and aggression. Yao^[36] explored the relationship between psychological abuse and neglect and adolescent malicious creativity, and the results showed that psychological abuse and neglect both positively predicted adolescent malicious creativity, which was consistent with the results of Li^[37]. Psychological abuse and neglect are also independent risk factors for problem behaviors in children and adults, including suicide, self-injury, harm to others, and intergenerational transmission, and have been shown to be positively correlated with nonsuicidal self-injury in childhood^[38], and abused individuals are more likely to adopt harsh parenting styles after becoming parents.

5. Intervention strategies for psychological abuse and neglect in childhood

Psychological abuse and neglect in childhood may lead to the emergence of individual psychological and behavioral problems of the abused person, and even pose a serious threat to the safety of the whole society. Therefore, it is particularly urgent and necessary to achieve "early prevention, early detection and early intervention".

5.1 At the national and government levels

The state and government play an important role in protecting children's mental health. Relevant departments should improve social support networks, laws and regulations, for the prevention and treatment of child psychological abuse and neglect, promote cooperation among multiple sectors of society, and employ effective intervention measures from different perspectives. The United Nations has promulgated the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and countries have successively formulated laws, regulations and response measures applicable to their own child protection, so as to ensure that children have access to reasonable and legal education methods and promote their healthy and stable physical and mental development.

The mandatory reporting laws of United States, Northern Ireland, Australia and other countries have expanded the definition of child abuse from only physical and sexual abuse to psychological abuse and neglect, and set up special funds for child protection, and established a program to prevent child psychological abuse and neglect, truly realizing that the people of the country attach great importance to this issue^[39]. The United States Academy of Pediatrics has also developed the Child Mental Health Systems Change Strategy Toolkit, which provides guidance for finding and developing child mental health resources^[21]. The International Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect is committed to sharing parenting knowledge and skills on a global platform to achieve the common goal of healthy growth of children around the world^[40]. Under the leadership of the government, Japan has established a childcare support service system to reduce the risk of abuse, and has set up family courts to hear child abuse cases and impose heavy penalties for child abuse, including psychological abuse and neglect^[41]. China has initially formed a basic system of legal protection for minors based on the Constitution and centered on the Law on the Protection of Minors and the Law on the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency. At the same time, the State Council's Leading Group for the Protection of Minors was established, once again emphasizing the importance of preventing psychological abuse and neglect of children. However, compared with some countries with mature protection systems, China's child protection system still needs to be further improved, especially to improve the awareness and understanding of child psychological abuse and neglect in society as a whole^[18]. The improvement and implementation of laws, regulations and policies should be strengthened, and a monitoring and reporting system should be established to ensure that all suspected cases of abuse are reported to local child protection agencies, especially in remote and low-income areas, to ensure that the policies are implemented to reduce the incidence of psychological abuse and neglect of children^[42].

5.2 Social and community levels

Societies and communities need to establish sound child protection mechanisms and pay more attention to children's mental health. All practitioners who provide services to children and families, including confinement nannies; Nursery Teacher; Mother and Child Counsellor; Teacher; Paediatricians, alike, should be trained to understand the caregiver behaviors that constitute psychological abuse and neglect of children, and the extent to which they are harmed, with a focus on identifying the types of child abuse, in particular equipping them with the ability to report hard-to-detect cases of psychological abuse and neglect, and to avoid making unsubstantiated reports, which is an important part of the global public health response^[43].

5.3 Family level

As the earliest and most intimate environment for children's growth, psychological abuse and neglect are undesirable factors in the family environment, and parents or caregivers should attach great importance to children's mental health. High levels of parental emotion regulation^[44], social support, and physical activity^[45] have been shown to alleviate the negative effects of psychological abuse and neglect in childhood, and are reinforced by existing interventions. According to the cycle of violence theory, early experiences of abuse are a direct factor in the development of violence into a form of intergenerational transmission. In response to this intergenerational impact, parents should be screened for mental health and adverse childhood experiences, and co-interventions should be implemented for both generations^[19]. Therefore, strengthening child protection is not only about investing family funds, but also about training couples in family planning, carrying out family education and lectures on establishing a harmonious parent-child relationship, and further improving their educational literacy^[46], suggesting that caregivers should not only pay attention to academics, but also pay attention to individual physical and mental health, so as to encourage them to use scientific and standardized education methods to raise children, identify and correct their own misbehaviors in a timely manner, and avoid causing psychological harm to children.

5.4 At the school level

As an important place for children's growth, schools should establish a sound mental health education system and pay attention to students' mental health.

Relevant education departments should urge primary and secondary schools across the country to have at least one full-time psychological counselor, and raise students' awareness of psychological abuse and neglect and prevention through mental health education courses. Schools should regularly invite psychotherapists to carry out psychological screening and assessment of students, so as to detect children's psychological problems in a timely manner and provide corresponding treatment and support, such as specific psychotherapy such as cognitive behavioral therapy or emotion regulation therapy. Psychotropic pharmacological interventions can also be used as a temporary adjunct to help abused individuals manage

symptoms such as sleep difficulties, nightmares, and anxiety^[18]. For students with social dysfunction, schools should create a harmonious and friendly peer environment for them, and help them acquire social skills, maintain social relationships, and cooperate through group learning^[35]. In addition, schools should strengthen communication and cooperation with medical staff and families to jointly protect children's mental health. At present, child protection still faces many challenges. Psychological abuse and neglect are more common among young children, and are more hidden than physical abuse and sexual abuse, but the negative impact on individuals is more difficult to control. The growth of adolescents and children is accompanied by the continuous development and maturity of neurological function. The influencing factors of childhood psychological abuse and neglect are complex, especially when multiple forms of abuse coexist, serious adverse consequences will occur. At present, it mainly relies on intervention methods such as psychodrama, group psychological counseling, cognitive behavioral therapy, family system therapy and emotion regulation therapy, and the training of professionals and the study of intervention effects are still in the initial stage. In response to this problem, it is suggested that researchers should consider establishing a multi-dimensional evaluation system in intervention studies, including the behavioral manifestations, psychological and emotional effects of psychological abuse and neglect, as well as the effects of the duration of psychological abuse and neglect, socioeconomic status, social support system outside the family, especially peer relationships. And the influence of factors such as individual psychopathology on these associations in order to fully understand the form, frequency and extent of abuse. At the same time, it is also necessary to pay attention to the long-term impact of psychological abuse and neglect on individual development at different stages, especially to conduct in-depth longitudinal research on the correlation of anxiety, depression and other psychological problems in adolescents^[47]. In summary, future research on psychological abuse and neglect should focus on multidimensional assessment, long-term effects, the role of family environment and social education, pay attention to research on special groups of adolescents, and strengthen cross-cultural research to provide evidence for improving the effectiveness and sustainability of abuse intervention.

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