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Physically Abused Children Highly Distracted by Anger

A large body of research finds that physically abused children have a very high risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems later in life. Now a study from researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison finds that these children have a tendency to focus and respond to even subtle signs of anger from others, one explanation for their distraction in classroom and social situations.

The researchers had previously shown that physically abused children tended to become especially vigilant about noticing signs of anger, threat, or harm. In this study, they wanted to understand how 4-year-olds who had been physically abused were able to focus and control their attention when exposed to a realistic hostile conversation between adults.

In the study, 33 children (both abused and not abused) played a computer game in one room while professional actors performed a scene in the next. During the scene, the actors started out calm, escalated into anger, then warmly resolved the conflict.

The researchers measured autonomic nervous system activity (such as changes in heart rate and skin conductance) to evaluate how children responded. Both groups showed the same levels of emotional arousal at the beginning of the experiment. However, physically abused children became more aroused as the conversation between the adults moved into anger. In fact, they stayed aroused even after the arguing adults reached conciliation.

This study suggests that even when the levels of anger are quite mild and no real threat of physical harm is involved, children with histories of abuse focus their attention to signs of threat in their surroundings.

“These results may help explain why abused children may be especially distracted in classroom and social situations,” said lead author Seth Pollak, Ph.D., professor of psychology, psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “They may be anxious about aspects of the environment that other children or adults might not even notice.”

Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 76, Issue 5, *Physically Abused Children's Regulation of Attention in Response to Hostility* by Pollak SD, Vardi S, Bechner AM, and Curtin JJ (University of Wisconsin-Madison). Copyright 2005 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.