Module 3 Child Abuse, Child Labour and Violence against Women

Lecture 16

Child Abuse: Causes and Effects

Causes of child abuse

There can be multiple causes of child abuse. However, the major cause of child abuse is adaptional failure or environmental maladjustment (both in family and work place) mostly on the part of the adult perpetrators (parents, employers…..) but to some extent on the part of adults responsible for family socialization as well (Kewalramani, 1992:152).

Causes of physical abuse

Child abuse is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes. Understanding the causes of abuse is crucial to addressing the problem of child abuse. These causes are multifaceted and involve interaction between society, culture, parents, and children. Different scholars have suggested different causes of physical abuse. Some consider the psycho-pathology of the individual perpetrators as the primary cause, others view the psycho-social pathology of family interaction as the main cause, and still others put major emphasis on situations of acute stress. The empirical study of Kewalramani conducted in Rajasthan, however, revealed that stress factors associated with families give a sufficient causal explanation for child abuse. The situational stresses pointed out four models of dominant causes of a child’s physical abuse: (a) relations between spouses, (b) relation between parents and children, (c) structural stresses, and (d) child-produced stresses.

Causes of sexual abuse

The four causes of sexual abuse mostly given are: adjustment problems of the perpetrators, family, disorganization, victim’s characteristics and the psychological disorders of the abusers. Kewalramani’s (1992:78) study on child abuse, however, approached the problem of sexual abuse with a ‘system model’ and perceived it as behaviour influenced by factors at several different levels, that is, a behavior which is the result of cumulative influence of a set of factors. The four variables related to sexual abuse were family environment, family structure, individual predispositions and situational factors. The analysis of family environment revealed that congestion in
family was not related to sexual abuse but conflict between parents and weakening of inhibitions leading to neglect of the children, absence of affectionate parent-child relationship within the family that fails to give support and protection to child, alcoholism of the earning male member, his lack of accountability, lack of adequate control on the children, illicit relations of the mother with some man and paramour’s hold on his mistress, dominance of stepfather, and social isolation of the family (that is, family not participating in social networks or community activities) were factors which were more important in sexual abuse. The environment in the workplace also contributes to sexual molestation. Several cases of assault by employers and molestations by co-workers of the young victims when they were all alone in the house/workplace/school were found in Kewalramani’s study. The loneliness of young girls makes them more vulnerable to the overtures of the perpetrators.

**Causes of emotional abuse**

Four important causes of emotional abuse can be identified as poverty, deficient parental control and non-cordial relations within family, maltreatment faced by parents in their own childhood or intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, and alcoholism of parents. Kemalramani also found these factors important in emotional abuse. More than half of the abuser parents had low income and 5-12 family members to support. Strauss (1979) and Deschner (1984, cited in Ahuja 1997) have also pointed out the effect of poverty on child abuse. However, it has now come to be believed that child abuse is not exclusively a lower socio-economic status situation, though it is predominantly a lower socio-economic problem. Pagelow (1984) has also referred to the role of inter-generational transmission in child maltreatment. However, Burgess and Youngblade (1985, cited in Ahuja 1997) have questioned this belief. Matlins (1981, cited in Ahuja 1997) has, however, described the alcoholic-abusers parents as having an important role in child abuse.
**Effects of child abuse**

Bolton and Bolton (1987:93-113) have identified eight possible effects of abuse on children, namely, self-devaluation, dependency, mistrust, revictimization, withdrawal from people, emotional trauma, deviant behaviour, and interpersonal problems.

Kewalramani’s study of child abuse lays down the effect of abuse on children in five significant areas. The first is loss of self-esteem, the second effect is on self-dependency, third on deviant behaviour. The fourth effect is on social and interpersonal problems and last effect is revictimization. Abused children develop a negative view of themselves. Elmer (1987) has called it ‘self-devaluation’ while Egeland, Sroufe and Erickson (1983:460) have called it ‘low self-esteem’. Kinard (1980:686-696) has mentioned it as ‘poor self-concept’ and Hjorth and Ostrow (1982:71-72) as ‘poor self-image’. Children have no choice but to accept the perpetrators abuse. The individual who maltreats them is their own parents so they cannot run away. Similarly, they have to tolerate their caretakers and employers hostility because of their poverty and their dependence on them. There are strong associations between exposure to child abuse in all its forms and higher rates of many chronic conditions. The strongest evidence comes from the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) series of studies which show correlations between exposure to abuse or neglect and higher rates in adulthood of chronic conditions, high-risk health behaviours and shortened lifespan.

**References**