

Physical abuse may raise risk of suicidal thoughts

April 24 2012

The study, published online this month in the journal *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, found that approximately one-third of adults who were physically abused in childhood had seriously considered taking their own life. These rates were five times higher than adults who were not physically abused in childhood. The findings suggest that children exposed to physical abuse may be at greater risk for suicidal behaviours in adulthood.

Investigators examined gender specific differences among a sample of 6,642 adults, of whom 7.7 per cent reported that they had been physically abused before the age of 18. They found that a strong association between childhood physical abuse and subsequent suicidal behaviours remained even after taking into account other known risk factors, such as adverse childhood conditions, health behaviours and psycho-social stressors.

"This research provides important new knowledge about the enduring effects of abuse in childhood," says lead author Esme Fuller-Thomson, Sandra Rotman Chair at University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Department of Family and Community Medicine. "The findings have important [clinical implications](#) for healthcare providers, suggesting the need to screen for [suicidal ideation](#) among adults who have experienced childhood physical abuse and highlighting the importance of providing [preventive treatment](#) to [childhood abuse](#) survivors."

The findings open up further areas of research. Previous studies have theorized that [habituation](#) to high levels of pain and fear through childhood abuse may contribute to adults' ability to inflict injury or harm on themselves. Recent research suggests suicide may have developmental origins relating to abuse – that physical or sexual abuse may lead to changes in the stress response in the brain which increase the risk of suicidal thoughts and behavior .

Co-author Tobi Baker, a former graduate student at the University of Toronto, notes that "one important avenue for future research is to investigate the bio-psycho-social mechanisms through which childhood physical abuse may translate into suicidal behaviours."

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Physical abuse may raise risk of suicidal thoughts (2012, April 24) retrieved 20 September 2024 from

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