

A systematic review of the emotional, behavioural and cognitive features exhibited by school-aged children experiencing neglect or emotional abuse

S. A. Maguire, B. Williams, A. M. Naughton, L. E. Cowley, V. Tempest, M. K. Mann, M. Teague and A. M. Kemp

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#### Abstract

##### Background

Interventions to minimize the long-term consequences of neglect or emotional abuse rely on prompt identification of these children. This systematic review of world literature (1947–2012) identifies features that children aged 5–14 years experiencing neglect or emotional abuse, as opposed to physical or sexual abuse, may exhibit.

##### Methods

Searching 18 databases, utilizing over 100 keywords, supplemented by hand searching, 13,210 articles were identified and 111 underwent full critical appraisal by two independent trained reviewers.

##### Results

The 30 included studies highlighted behavioural features (15 studies), externalizing features being the most prominent (8/9 studies) and internalizing features noted in 4/6 studies. Four studies identified attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) associated features: impulsivity, inattention or hyperactivity. Child difficulties in initiating or developing friendships were noted in seven studies. Of 13 studies addressing emotional well-being, three highlighted low self-esteem, with a perception of external control (1), or depression (6) including suicidality (1). A negative internal working model of the mother increased the likelihood of depression (1). In assessing cognition or academic performance, lower general intelligence (3/4) and reduced literacy and numeracy (2) were reported, but no observable effect on memory (3).

##### Conclusions

School-aged children presenting with poor academic performance, ADHD symptomatology or abnormal behaviours warrant assessment of neglect or emotional abuse as a potential underlying cause.