

There is little question that family dysfunction can lead to long-term social problems. Interactions between parents and children provide opportunities for children to either acquire, or inhibit, antisocial behavior patterns. Good parenting lowers the risk of delinquency for children living in high-crime areas.

The nuclear family is showing signs of breakdown. Research indicates that parents whose marriage is secure produce children who are secure and independent. Children who have experienced family breakup are more likely to demonstrate behavior problems and delinquency than children in intact families. Remarriage does not lessen the effects of divorce on youth.

Children who grow up in dysfunctional homes often exhibit delinquent behaviors, having learned at a young age that aggression pays off. Kids who are conflict-prone may actually help to destabilize households. Delinquency will be reduced if at least one parent can provide parental efficacy. Studies show that the parents of delinquent youths tend to be inconsistent disciplinarians- either overly harsh, or extremely lenient. Parents who closely supervise their children, and have close ties with them, help reduce the likelihood of adolescent delinquent behavior.

A number of studies have found that parental deviance has a powerful influence on delinquent behavior. Kids whose parents go to prison are much more likely to be at risk for delinquency than children of non-incarcerated parents. The link between parental deviance and child misbehavior may be genetic, experiential, or even related to labeling and stigma.

Many children are physically abused or neglected by their parents. Adolescent victims of sexual abuse are particularly at risk for stress and anxiety. Millions of allegations of child abuse and neglect are made each year, and about 700,000 kids are the victims of abuse. Abusive families suffer from severe stress. Research indicates that stepchildren share a greater risk for abuse than biological offspring.

If the care a child receives falls below reasonable standards, the state may take action to remove the child from the home, and place her or him in a less threatening environment. Once reported to a child protection agency, the case is screened by an intake worker, and then turned over to an investigative caseworker. Even when there is compelling evidence of abuse, most social service agencies will try to involve the family in voluntary treatment. Post-investigation services are offered on a voluntary basis, by child welfare agencies, to ensure the safety of children. If the allegation of abuse is confirmed, the child may be placed in protective custody.

State jurisdictions have instituted procedures to minimize trauma to the child during court proceedings for abuse or neglect. Most states now allow a child's testimony to be given on closed-circuit television (CCTV). Children in sexual abuse cases have been allowed to use anatomically correct dolls to demonstrate happenings that they cannot describe verbally.

This assumed link between maltreatment and delinquency is supported by a number of criminological theories. Studies of juvenile offenders have confirmed that between 70 and 80 percent may have had abusive backgrounds. It is difficult to assess the temporal order of the linkage: Does early abuse lead to later delinquency? Or conversely, are antisocial kids subject to overly harsh parental discipline and abuse?