

Child Maltreatment: New Frontiers in Research & Practice

Latent vulnerability: Child maltreatment through the lens of neuroscience

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Childhood adversity, in the form of maltreatment and neglect, is one of the strongest predictors of later mental health problems across childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

However, the neurobiological mechanisms by which childhood adversity 'gets under the skin' remain poorly understood. I will introduce the concept of Latent Vulnerability as a way of understanding the enduring effects of threatening, unpredictable, or neglectful early environments.

I will review the evidence that several neuro-cognitive systems – including those implicated in threat processing and autobiographical memory – adapt in response to early adversity. While such adaptations may have short-term functional advantages for the child, in the long terms they appear to increase risk of mental health problems. Implications for an increased focus on preventative intervention will be explored.