

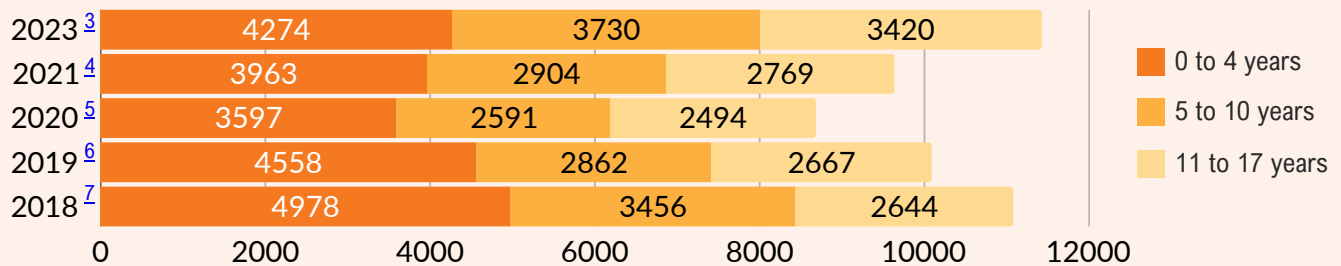
CHILD MALTREATMENT: EFFECTS ON THE BRAIN

Brain development is impacted by both genetics and experiences. As children grow, their brain develop basic functions first (e.g., breathing), before progressing to more sophisticated function (e.g., complex thought).¹

WHAT IS CHILD MALTREATMENT?

Child maltreatment includes all types of abuse and neglect of a child under the age of 18 by a parent, caregiver, or other person in a child-serving role. There are four common types of abuse: **physical**, **sexual**, **emotional**, and **neglect**.²

SUBSTANTIATED CHILD VICTIMS OF MALTREATMENT IN GEORGIA, BY AGE



THE IMPACT OF MALTREATMENT⁸

- Triggers lasting fear responses, even without real threats
- Disrupts emotional and stress regulation
- Delays developmental milestones
- Impairs executive functions such as memory, attention, and impulse control
- Reduces responsiveness to positive feedback or rewards
- Makes social interactions more challenging

OTHER FACTORS IMPACTING DEVELOPMENT



Responding to Stress

The timing and intensity of stress shape its impact on the brain:

- **Positive:** brief, moderate challenges that are a normal part of life⁹
- **Tolerable:** more severe, longer-lasting stress that can be managed IF buffered by supportive adults¹⁰
- **Toxic stress:** strong, frequent, prolonged stress that overwhelms the system and disrupts healthy development¹¹



Sensitive Periods

Windows of time in development when certain parts of the brain may be more susceptible to certain experiences (e.g., strong attachments to caregivers formed during infancy)¹²



POLICY AND PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand evidence-based afterschool, out-of-school, and summer programs
- Decrease family violence through the adoption and promotion of evidence-based practices and approaches
- Increase access to evidence-based or research-informed programs for parenting skills and support that help parents/caregivers understand all stages of their child's development
- Increase access to family support services in emergency rooms and urgent care facilities
- Promote access and expand comprehensive and specialized supports for families of children with disabilities
- Promote policies that ensure at-risk families receive evidence-based parenting education
- Promote strategies to ensure families can quickly recover from natural disasters and public-health crises
- Promote the development of transition plans for state-placed children and youth (e.g., Department of Juvenile Justice, Division of Family and Children Services), and engage families in the planning process
- Promote, link, and support information and referral systems
- Shape social norms around positive parenting and family help-seeking in times of need (e.g., public awareness campaigns)

*Trauma-induced changes to the brain can result in varying degrees of **cognitive impairment** and **emotional dysregulation** that can lead to a host of problems, including difficulty with attention and focus, learning disabilities, low self-esteem, impaired social skills, and sleep disturbances.*

-Child Welfare Information Gateway, Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth



REFERENCES FOR CHILD MALTREATMENT: EFFECTS ON THE BRAIN

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- 2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Understanding Child Maltreatment." Retrieved August 13, 2025 from <https://www.cdc.gov/child-abuse-neglect/about/index.html>.
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