Child abuse is a grave issue that has been prevalent for centuries, affecting an immense number of children, causing them a variety of detrimental effects. According to the National Children’s Alliance, a long-standing institution intending to eradicate child abuse, “More than 600,000 children are abused in the U.S each year…” (NCA). On this graph, the number of reported child maltreatment victims is visible every year from 2012-2021, and it can be seen that only in 2021 did the number drop below 600,000.

The staggering prevalence of child abuse only outlines it as a source of intense trauma—“…psychological, life-threatening injury resulting from catastrophic…experiences, from which the individual…cannot escape, but to which the reaction is one of terror, helplessness, and a sense of being overwhelmed” (Rahill et. al 581).

Despite this, in the past, many people—including children—have adapted to similarly extreme trauma. This phenomenon was demonstrated during the 2010 Haitian earthquake, where survivors were resilient after being subjected to long-term psychological and physical trauma that was only compounded by the earthquake’s occurrence, as evidenced by Guitele Rahill, Associate Professor in the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences at the University of South Florida, who stated that survivors adapted to their circumstances with protective coping mechanisms—particularly, “many highlighted the need for positive emotions, stressing the importance of laughter, jokes, and sports events for the children as valuable ‘distractions’ in helping them to deal with the day-to-day stresses…” (598).

Jennifer Foster, Assistant Professor of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University, aligns with this sentiment with regard to the coping mechanisms of child abuse survivors, stating, “Children's narrative accounts of their abuse and recovery indicate an overwhelming sense of optimism, hope and readiness to move forward towards a positive future following adversity" (Foster 132)...hinting to the idea of behavioral divergencies, or changes in behavior considered to be 'out of the norm,' in this case triggered by coping with and trying to become resilient to child abuse. This is further supported by The dark side of resilience, which discusses behaviors used by those exposed to too much trauma as they overdeveloped their resilience, quite similar to children's coping mechanisms when faced with trauma as impactful as child abuse.

Prominently, many behavioral divergencies exhibited by survivors of childhood abuse cause a decline in their emotional well-being. According to the National Research Council, “Psychological consequences range from chronic low self-esteem to severe dissociative states…” (NRC 15). These effects occur due to the behavioral divergences resulting from childhood abuse, as they are developed in an attempt to rationalize the abuse. In many cases, victims of child abuse conclude that they are at fault for the abuse, rather than the true perpetrators. In the short term, this helps victims gain acceptance of their situation rather than uncertainty. But when childhood abuse is no longer an active part of their lives, this jump to self-blame causes chronically poor self-esteem and further self-blame, which perpetually ruins survivors’ capacity to feel enough life satisfaction to be content with their own characteristics.

The low emotional well-being of childhood abuse survivors also causes drastic impact to their decision-making capabilities. The Human Development Teaching & Learning Group of Portland State University believe that these detriments harm the brain areas that serve intentional self-regulation, decision-making, and planning (Human Development 157-158). Melissa Merrick, President and CEO of Prevent Child Abuse America, asserts that that survivors of child abuse may find themselves avoiding contemplating resilience-building situations, rushing through decision-making rather than processing the risks involved (Merrick 10-13), due to a fear of experiencing trauma similar to that of previous child abuse experiences. However, the lack of these experiences halts their understanding of how to take healthy risks. If they do not possess these skills and are unable to make stable decisions later on in their lives, they will often be under high duress due to the necessities of living in a complex society.

While survivors of child abuse who lack resilience often gain trust issues and have trouble communicating, these effects are even more detrimental for those that do become resilient. Often, after survivors of child maltreatment are able to remove themselves from the circumstances that led to their abuse, the personal characteristics they developed to become resilient turn maladaptive, even influencing them to avoid criticism entirely. As referenced by The dark side of resilience, “…too much resilience can get in the way of leadership effectiveness and, by extension, team and organizational effectiveness…to protect against psychological harm, they deploy quite aggressive coping mechanisms that artificially inflate their egos” (Chamorro-Premuzic and Lusk). As a result, many survivors of childhood abuse are simply unwilling to take feedback from others, leading to extremely poor communication, which becomes exceedingly evident as survivors grow but continue to lack deep, intimate connections with others.

While it is true that these factors—well-being, decision-making, and communication—are considered to have a correlation to life satisfaction, and thus detriments to them are indicative of overall quality of life, other factors that can affect their life satisfaction need to be addressed, such as their state of living, monetary status, and more; however, these factors have not been researched to a great extent with regard to survivors of child abuse.

Although it is clear that protective factors such as supportive relationships can help with the trauma of child abuse, truly utilizing them to protect victims is exceedingly difficult to implement, as it would require an institutional effort given that many children are not able to seek the resources they need on their own.

Many perpetrators of child abuse push the idea that they are justified in doing so, and that abuse is beneficial for victims. They believe that perpetrating child abuse would ‘toughen up’ the affected child. In some cases, this does appear to hold true—some child victims and adult survivors demonstrate positive coping, strength and resilience. But this is the outlier, not the norm—most survivors do not develop such resilience. Rahill discusses the vulnerability of children when developing resilience to trauma, stating that although many of the Haitian survivors of the 2010 earthquake displayed surprisingly high levels of resilience, the child survivors were far more vulnerable, but the supportive social environment surrounding them helped prevent them from succumbing to their trauma (Rahill et. al 597-598). Unfortunately for many child abuse survivors, many familial members who could be a source of protection against child abuse instead perpetrate it. Thus, the lack of protective factors often culminates in victims simply developing a further vulnerability to trauma, making them gain a more negative outlook on their lives.

Although the behavioral divergencies associated with experiences of child abuse are known to help survivors cope with the deep psychological trauma generated by similarly traumatic experiences, it is clear that such behaviors, when not necessary in situations presented to survivors, become maladaptive, causing survivors to blame themselves for unfortunate situations, leading to low self-esteem, poor risk management, and deficient communication skills. Thus, the divergent behaviors associated with survivors of child abuse always hinder their future quality of life. In order for these divergencies to remain beneficial in the future, children need to be exposed to protective factors and encouraged to form supportive, caring relationships, but it would take a lot of time to institutionally implement positive factors nationally.