



Psychosocial Impacts of Child Labour¹

Child labour can seriously affect children’s social and emotional development and wellbeing. Different aspects of children’s work can cause harm to their psychosocial wellbeing. The impact of psychosocial hazards can cause significant stress, and if they are not mitigated, children can develop mental health conditions that require specialised support. Children in the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) particularly often experience extremely stressful events such as separation from their parents, injury, sexual violence and other traumatic situations.

PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS	
Job content	Child labour is by its definition harmful. There are different aspects of job content which can be hazardous for children. These include low value of work, low use of skills, lack of task variety and repetitiveness in work, uncertainty, lack of opportunity to learn, high attention demands, conflicting demands and insufficient resources. Work that is boring or repetitive for children can undermine their self-worth and hamper their opportunities for developing cognitive and social skills; it can even lead to anxiety and depression, resentment and generally poor psychological health. Many children in the WFCL work in extremely dangerous situations and in exploitative and abusive conditions where they are degraded, stigmatised and rejected by employers, peers or others in school and community settings. Girls and boys who have been sexually abused or associated with armed groups or forces may be stigmatised rather than supported, adding to their social exclusion.
Workload and work pace	High workload and high work pace are common sources of stress in children. High workload can be described as work that requires high physical effort or involves long work hours. High work pace can involve difficult tasks or having to perform many different types of tasks at the same time or in the same workplace. Workload and work pace can lead to high levels of distress and stress-related illnesses in children.
Shift work and long work hours	Child labour may involve working in shifts, including working at night, working long hours or rotating or unpredictable shifts that disturb children’s rest and sleep patterns. As a result, children may experience high levels of distress, fatigue and exhaustion. Shift work can also affect children’s ability to attend school and concentrate. It can cause poor school performance, school dropout and can even increase the likelihood of accidents at work.
Control	Children in child labour, especially those in WFCL, often have limited control over decisions affecting their lives. They may have limited control over their work activities or their workload. Sometimes they are forcibly moved, separated from their families, friends and cultural practices. They may be disoriented by new situations, daily routines and unfamiliar (work) demands. A lack of control and limited agency can lead to feelings of anxiety, depression, work-related stress, apathy, exhaustion, poor physical health and low self-esteem.

Environment and equipment	<p>The physical hazards associated with child labour have a direct impact on children’s health, stress and psychosocial wellbeing. Child labour commonly involves chemical, physical, ergonomic, biological and psychological hazards that can impact on both physical and mental health:</p> <p>Toxic substances affect the developing nervous system and children’s psychological functioning.</p> <p>Unhealthy workplaces, lack of space, noisy, poorly lit and ill-ventilated environments pose risks to children’s general health, and these factors increase stress, fatigue and demoralisation.</p> <p>Dangerous tools, without adequate safety precautions, may induce stress and fear of accidents. Children may be traumatised by suffering or witnessing serious incidents. Children working in extreme conditions, e.g. mining and fishing, are especially vulnerable.</p> <p>Serious injuries or permanent impairments in work-related accidents may increase the risk of isolation or stigmatisation.</p> <p>The impact of exposure to physical hazards will depend on a child’s age, maturity level and other factors such as their health and any pre-existing conditions. Generally, younger children are at greatest risk due to the rapid physical and psychological change they go through, but adolescents are more often exposed to multiple hazards, use more dangerous equipment or work longer hours.</p>
Interpersonal relationships	<p>Interpersonal relations at work are essential for both individual and organisational health. Poor or abusive work relationships can be a main source of stress for children in child labour; they often experience high levels of emotional neglect, as well as maltreatment, bullying, physical and sexual violence. Child labour can also affect other interpersonal relationships for children and lead to social isolation in the community or at school, exclusion from peer groups and a lack of social support.</p>
Precarious working conditions	<p>Job insecurity, poor pay and uncertainty can have a detrimental impact on a person’s psychosocial wellbeing and mental health. Children in child labour often have to cope with a combination of insecurities, which include financial insecurity, lack of formal contracts, lack of sick leave or holiday pay, lack of legal protection against exploitation and a general lack of care and support in the workplace.</p>
Home–work interface	<p>Conflicting demands of work and responsibilities at home have a significant impact on children. Children, especially adolescent girls, often bear heavy domestic and caregiving responsibilities alongside other work. When parents provide children with care, attention, support and encouragement, this can mitigate children’s stress. However, when parents have unreasonable expectations of children and punish them for not fulfilling these, the “home–work interface” can lead to high levels of stress for children. For many children who work within their families, their homes are often also their workplace, and in these situations, there are few boundaries to the demands that are made on children’s time and loyalty. While family-based work can strengthen personal identity and psychosocial wellbeing, when the work is excessive, exploitative or abusive, family-based child workers may face even greater risks as they are denied their primary source of emotional security, socialisation and learning.</p>

1 Adapted from: ILO IPEC (2014). [Assessing psychosocial hazards and impact of child labour](#); and the UK Home Office [Modern Slavery Awareness & Victim Identification Guidance](#)