

**Identifying Personality Traits and Behaviors
of Children Vulnerable to Exploitation or Being Exploited**

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Abstract

Children, by nature of their early developmental stages and dependence on adult others for provision, safety, and nurture, comprise a population with inherent vulnerabilities. A risk associated with their dependence on and subjection to adult guidance and care

involves exploitation in physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological realms of functioning. This article explores the personality traits and accompanying behaviors that factor into children's susceptibility to exploitation, or evidence their subjection to such abuse and neglect. The concepts of attachment theory, stages of childhood development, and adverse childhood experiences are explored in light of their contribution to childhood resilience and vulnerability. These concepts are integrated with the Five Factor Model of human personality and the Profile of Mental Functioning for children to offer clarity on the personality traits of children likely to be exploited as well as the behaviors that may indicate such exploitation. Recommendation for addressing adult preparedness for optimal care environments for children is offered.

Keywords: child exploitation, children's personality, children's behaviors, childhood trauma, adverse childhood experiences, personality traits, vulnerable, exploitation, childhood development

Identifying Personality Traits and Behaviors

of Children Vulnerable to Exploitation or Being Exploited

Children comprise a unique population, possessing both strengths and vulnerabilities. The uniqueness of childhood vulnerability involves a combination of their early stages of human development, their emotional, physical, and psychological fragility, and their resulting essential dependence on adults for foundational wants and needs. These include safety, nurture, and immersion in formational social, cultural, and educational practices (Geisinger, 2019). Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bretherton, 1992) offers a framework for understanding the emotional bonds and interactional connections that determine a child's sense of safety and freedom to explore, and the child's adaptation to sensed threat or danger. Attachment theory, also offers valuable insight into the development of personality traits and their relationship to childhood experiences.

Exploitation of children can occur in several ways, all of which are premised on the relative powerlessness of the child. In its

broadest sense, child exploitation refers to the “[use of] a minor child for profit, power, status, sexual gratification, or some other purpose.” (Legal Dictionary, 2015). While all children, by nature of their defenselessness, are vulnerable to exploitation, those who become the most likely candidates for subjection to and entrenchment in repeated experiences of exploitation are those who encounter caregivers and socioemotional environments that intentionally compromise or inadvertently fail to preserve and protect their inherent humanity. This may include failure to provide for children’s basic needs, and compromising or negating their autonomy or capacity to thrive. When such experiences of deprivation begin early in life, the likelihood of exploitative encounters having more intractable and lasting impact on a child can be substantial (Oshri et al., 2013).

Clarifying Major Terms Used in this Article

Clarity is warranted regarding the following terms that comprise the focus of this article: *children*, *vulnerability*, and *exploitation*, *personality traits*, and *behaviors*. *Child* and *children* refer to persons between the ages of 4 and 11 years old as identified in

the Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual (PDM 2; Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017). These include the developmental periods spanning the latter end of early childhood (2-4 years), middle childhood (5-7 years), and late childhood (8-10 years). The choice to begin at 4 years old aligns with the development of more consistent self-awareness and observable memory-shaped behavioral patterns (Harter, 2012; Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017; Siegel, 2012). There are unique developmental milestones that are typically achieved during specific formative periods in children, and which, given various stressful conditions, can be delayed, compromised, or arrested (Burke-Harris, 2018; Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017). An important caveat is that the majority of research conducted on exploited minors is restricted to youth because of limitations pertaining to the age of research participants as well as the challenge of obtaining informed consent from parents or guardians (Rothman et al., 2018). *Vulnerability* is one's capacity for "being physically or emotionally wounded" Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.). The American Psychological Association (APA) further defines vulnerability as "a susceptibility to developing a condition, disorder, or disease when

exposed to certain agents or conditions” (n.d.). Vulnerability simultaneously identifies children’s susceptibility to covert and overt disempowerment by individuals who assume an unhealthy controlling, rather than caring or nurturing role in their lives, or by the absence, as through abandonment, neglect, or unplanned caregiver separation such as severe illness, disability, or death, without the replacement or compensatory presence of caring providers (Geisinger, 2019; King, 2021). *Exploitation* is the taking advantage of another, or using another’s vulnerability for one’s own benefit (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022). The Legal Dictionary (2015) offers a more descriptive breadth of acts, including cheap labor, sexual advantage and abuse such as pornography or personal sexual gratification, as well as other forms of for-profit use, as child-labor, child-slavery, child sex tourism, illegal adoption and drug involvement, known as economic exploitation, and all of which are criminal acts. Much of the extant research on exploitation of children and adolescents spotlights sexual as opposed to other forms of abuse (e.g., Landers et al., 2017; Moynihan et al., 2018; Pereda & Segura, 2021; Wolf, M. R., & Prabhu, S., 2021), despite the myriad in which

children can be inappropriately disadvantaged. Common among all definitions cited is the distinct role of power imbalance, and its potentially debilitating, often long-term impact on the wellbeing and best outcomes for the child.

Character traits and behaviors are both connected to personality formation. These terms require a carefully nuanced understanding in order to avoid the reductionistic labeling and pathologizing of children, given their inherent vulnerabilities (Geisinger, 2019). As such, *character* is understood as one's unique internalized way of understanding and functioning mentally, affectively, and behaviorally, or how one typically functions in a given situation (Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017). *Personality* is a term that is often used interchangeably with character and connotes the observable component of character, or unique ways of presenting the self (Horowitz, 2014). The terms are therefore also considered synonymous as used in this article. *Traits* are psychological attributes that inform a person's inherent and social conditioning – they are distinctive to an individual relative to others in a group or population (such as family, ethnicity, learning community), and can be

understood based on the mildness or intensity of their presentation, e.g., patience, aggressiveness, and loyalty (Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017). In psychology and mental health research, the Five Factor Model (The Big Five; McCrae & John, 1992; Widiger, 2017) has identified a range of trait-dimensions that are commonly linked to human personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (see *Five Factors and the Profile of Mental Functioning* below). *Behavior*, as an element of character, refers to the medium of communication and involves response, action, or interaction in the context of self or other – behavior may involve overt or covert activity, and may be voiced, or unvoiced (APA, n.d.). Now that the primary terms have been defined, I will offer clarity on the scope of this article.

Scope of This Article

To advance the discussion on the recognition of personality traits and behaviors of children who are vulnerable to and who may experience various forms of exploitation, this article will focus on the internal and interpersonal experiences that for children, require coping

mechanisms that may exceed their psychological, emotional, and physiological capacity to appropriately master at their various stages of lifespan development. I will therefore begin with an overview of attachment theory that offers clarity on how children develop an internal sense of safety or danger, and the emergence of unique ways of responding to perceived safety or danger based on their emotional bonds with primary caregivers and significant early relationships.

An exploration of various stressors that can impact children's capacity for emotional regulation, known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), will follow. This will demonstrate in greater detail how suboptimal early attachment experiences can be overwhelmingly stressful for children, and if undetected or unaddressed, can lead to psychological distortion of their sense of self, others, and the world around them with potentially harmful outcomes. I follow with a review of the childhood phases of human lifespan development, which will highlight ways that children ideally navigate various stages of growth and maturity, and how normalized responses can be undermined by adverse experiences. This will lead to an outline of character traits and behaviors demonstrative of

susceptibility to exploitation and being exploited. The article will conclude with a summative recommendation for mitigating children's propensity to being exploited. Vulnerability to exploitation begins with children's experiences of psychological and emotional attachment.

Attachment Theory and Children's Sense of Safety

No child is born with an implicit or self-generated inclination toward exploitation. As noted in the definitions above, exploitation involves the disempowering of a child, the denial of their agency, and the compromise of their multifaceted wellbeing for the profit, pleasure, or convenience of another. Agency for a child is vicarious, in that it is actualized and facilitated through an adult caregiver and begins with the child's emotional bonding experiences. Attachment, an emotional bond between two people that for a child begins in utero and continues after birth, was initially researched by Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby. Ainsworth, for example, built on elements of William Blatz' security theory which attributed felt security in children to the assurance provided by consistent parental care and

buffering (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Blatz, 1966), as well as Bowlby's observation of the impact of maternal separation on children's identity formation (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Specifically, Bowlby's work identified attachment behavior – actions demonstrating a desperation for emotional reconnection and safety through expressions of anxiety, such as crying, reaching, clinging, following – that was triggered by separation from a caring and nurturing other and the accompanying sense of danger and helplessness (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). Bowlby also hypothesized that the primary attachment figure functioned as a secure base from which, ideally, the child would feel empowered and sufficiently safe to explore the environment and venture further away with confidence (Bowlby, 1982). Ainsworth validated Bowlby's hypothesis by observing infants separated from their mothers and interfacing with unfamiliar individuals in her *Strange Situation* experiment where, upon extended uninterrupted separation, children's responses were seen to progress from protest behaviors, through yearning, disorganization, despair, and ultimately –

if connection remained unrestored – to resignation, numbing, and detachment (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970).

Ainsworth further identified three basic attachment styles, or ways of relating and interacting, that tend to develop from an individual's earliest experiences of emotional bonding and safety with their primary attachment figures (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991). *Secure* attachment develops when a child experiences a responsive adult sensitive to their needs, and offering security to explore the environment and to depend on when danger is perceived. *Insecure* attachment results from a repeated lack of sensed responsiveness or safety by the child and can be further subdivided based on the interactional dynamic between the adult attachment figure(s) and the child. Children who experience a parental figure as consistently unresponsive or emotionally unavailable learn that they cannot depend on the adult for connection or safety and seek alternative ways to self-protect and self-soothe. These children tend to be *avoidantly* attached, fear seeking social connection, and develop inherent distrust of others. For children who experience adult responsiveness and availability as unpredictable or undependable, pervasive uncertainty

can yield an *ambivalent* attachment style, which may manifest in bouts of anger at sensed abandonment, attention-seeking performance or overperformance aimed at preventing further separation, or a combination of these behaviors.

A fourth attachment style, known as *disorganized*, results when a child develops fear of the primary attachment figure(s) from whom they expect and need safety and positive emotional connection (Main & Solomon, 1980). This fear typically arises from coercive or otherwise invasively controlling or violent behavior experienced by the child at the hands of the adult attachment figure, and results in unpredictable (hence disorganized) behavior from the child. Behavior may vacillate, for example, from clinginess to violent outbursts, fear-filled avoidance, or other survival-oriented behaviors (Cook et al., 2005). This attachment style is particularly germane to the experience of exploitation. Speaking to the typical adult response and potential behavioral outcome for such children, Poole-Heller (2019) explains that,

When reacting to the fear, threat, and dysregulation in [disorganized attachment], children may naturally act out the

distress they cannot contain, often causing them to be seen as a “problem child.” They are then punished for their dysregulation, which only exacerbates the difficulty. In the extreme, this pattern may contribute to addiction, psychiatric conditions, personality disorders, or criminal behaviors. (p.111)

From an adult’s perspective, intense interaction, or non-interaction with a child can be rationalized as non-threatening and logical – even warranted. For a child, however, who at the core needs to feel safe and affirming connection, and who simultaneously lacks control over their environment, such adult behavior can be experienced as overwhelmingly isolating, unnaturally punitive, or deeply threatening.

For a developing child, adult behaviors interpreted as disaffirming and alienating can be profoundly traumatizing, particularly if ongoing, and can have lasting negative impact on both physiological and psychological development. Poole-Heller’s explanation speaks to a potentially destructive cycle that can develop when children’s needs, subjective experiences, and responses are misread and mislabeled as problematic. Children may then learn to

assuage their emotional pain in activities or behaviors that offer immediate distraction or relief, albeit coupled with risk and harm. For this reason, an understanding of the role of adverse childhood experiences in the developmental trajectory of children is instructive. To frame such an understanding, a developmental perspective on childhood is warranted.

Childhood Development and Vulnerability to Exploitation

Childhood involves the most critical stages of human development, in which children learn to understand themselves, their social environment, and their place in the world through day-to-day experiences in addition to decisive physiological, emotional, and neurological formation (Santrock, 2012). While human development is usually considered through the lens of chronological age (i.e., time since birth), physical functioning and wellbeing, mental health, and social bonding and interaction also factor into how one develops and thrives or struggles to thrive (Santrock, 2012; Siegel, 2012). One should therefore remain conscious of potential nuances that may exist based on differences in the childhood experiences in any or all of

these domains from one individual to another. Two theories I find extremely helpful in understanding childhood development – particularly in this discussion on vulnerability to exploitation – are *Erikson's Psychoanalytic Theory* and *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory*.

Erikson's Psychoanalytic Theory – Early Stages

Erik Erikson's approach considers epigenetic (the impact of environment and experience on genetic expression and transmission) and cultural influences on the individual, and sees childhood development as a progression through four stages, each of which includes a task to become oriented to and for which capacity is increased or compromised based on socio-environmental and psychological experiences (Erikson, 1963; 1980). The first stage, where *trust* is developed or challenged by *distrust* during the first year of life, is very much connected to a child's interactions with its mother and primary caregivers. Here, the ability to sense interactions as dependable, consistent, and affirming at the most basic level are at the core of the child's ability to internalize and reflect trust. The absence or inconsistency of affirming trust experiences may yield

protest reactions, such as crying and seeking that, unless corrected with presence and reassurance, factor into the child's personality development and interaction with those beyond the primary caregiver, and beyond infancy.

Erikson's second stage, *autonomy* or sensed control and capacity to act and to express oneself emerges between one and three years. Autonomy, when sabotaged or experienced as withheld or denied, can result in shame and doubt, reflected in withdrawing or controlling impulses and behaviors. Conversely, shame can erode any sensed autonomy and can be understood as self-directed rage (Erikson, 1963). Children tend to see themselves, rather than their actions, as unacceptable or judged when reprimanded or otherwise disempowered, and tend to demonstrate withdrawing behaviors such as drooping of the shoulders and head, and silence (Harter, 2012). Controlling behaviors also indicate an attempt to gain mastery, not simply of a situation, but also of the associated uncomfortable emotions, such as fear.

The next developmental challenge that children experience is that of *Initiative* vs guilt (Erikson, 1963). In this phase, between three

and five years, a child becomes increasingly aware of their physical and mental potential to perform tasks and to ask questions; and seeks to do so, often by mimicking what is observed in others, or by pursuing imaginative curiosities. Observations of adult behaviors, for example, may become the subject of play encounters. When attempts at tasks are either unsuccessful, criticized, or inhibited, guilt may be reflected in expressions of disappointment, such as tantrums, moodiness, or self-imposed silence. The cumulative impact of shame, doubt, and guilt may erode a child's sense of self and worth (Harter, 2012). Harter argues that children can internalize adult criticism or inhibition as rejection, and consequently view themselves as worthless. The repetitive nature of such experiences in childhood will impede a child's psychological development and compromise relational confidence. The guilt component yields suppression of the true self of the child and the emergence of a compliant false-self that acquiesces to perceived expectations and demands at the expense of internal protest and discomfort. In such cases, a child can become less resistant to various forms of exploitation by anyone perceived as having power over them.

Prior to entering puberty and adolescence, children, according to Erikson, face one additional developmental challenge – that of *industry v. inferiority*. In this developmental phase, from about six years until adolescence, children become aware of their increasing capacity to handle tasks, often by mimicking peer, family, or community exemplars, or by following structured instructions from influential figures in their lives. The move toward industriousness – productivity by use of skill, knowledge, or other capacity, yields recognition and validation, offering increased self-assurance and internal affirmation. When success is evasive, or recognition is either withheld or distorted, it is not unusual for the child to see themselves or their failed accomplishment as an indicator of inferiority or incapacity. Again, the self is assessed as faulty or inadequate, potentially compounding already present feelings of shame and distrust. Thus, Harter contends that, “Typically the causes of [childhood] pathology involve an interaction between the child’s level of cognitive development and chronic, negative treatment at the hands of caregivers” (2012, p. 43). Siegel (2012) stresses the importance of understanding that attachment experiences, which contribute to a

child's internalized sense of relational dependability or evasiveness, safety or threat, validation or invalidation, develop in the context of repeated interactions with significant others, particularly primary caregivers. Co-occurring factors, including cultural nuances and socio-environmental conditions, also shape the context of those relationships (Siegel, 2012). The intersecting cultural and environmental nuances can be better appreciated through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, which I will now briefly outline.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory and Exploitation

Urie Bronfenbrenner was a primary 20th century advocate for seeking to understand human development in the actual contexts of lived experiences as opposed to artificial laboratory settings. His work situates the child's development in the multiple overlapping ecosystems over time in which the child either functions, or by which it is impacted – both directly and indirectly. These ecosystems are social spheres of existence and functioning within which all the Eriksonian stages identified above are lived out. Bronfenbrenner (2005; 2009) identified five ecosystems that impact a child's experience and development by influencing their understanding of

self, other, and the world. The *microsystem* consists of a child's immediate social environment, such as family, or immediate friends, or neighbors and close others. Words, behaviors, signals of worth or diminishment communicated in any microsystem can become significantly determinative to the child's senses of self and the world. The *mesosystem* consists of points of intersection of the various microsystems in which the child exists. These might include, for example, parents (home) interacting with teachers (school), or friends and extended family.

The *exosystem* functions when the child is directly impacted by an occurrence in another microsystem in which the child does not function. If a parent, for example, experiences job-loss that then affects the provision of food or other items for the child, or affects the adult's mood while at home, the child is challenged to assimilate this into their developmental functioning. All these ecosystems function within the *macrosystem*, which includes cultural and communal practices and norms, as well as social – including religious – and political institutions and structures, and their impact on life and relationships. Finally, the *chronosystem* involves time-bound events

or experiences, such as a vehicular accident, a birth, a physical attack, the loss of a parent, or any event that may significantly affect a child's lived experience. The overlapping and cumulative influence of these various ecosystemic experiences and the concurrent challenges in the formative years to curate trust, autonomy, initiative, and industry over mistrust, shame and doubt, guilt, and inferiority can be very stressful for a child. The intersection of relational dependence, in which a child is essentially disempowered, and chronic stress can, unfortunately, facilitate and reinforce the conditions for exploitation. The role of intense chronic stressors on childhood development therefore warrants consideration to better appreciate children's susceptibility to exploitation.

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Susceptibility to Exploitation

Attachment theory underscores the importance of psycho-emotional as well as physical safety and bonding for children's wellbeing (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991; Bowlby, 1982). Several early childhood experiences have been found to threaten children's perceived security and connection, and correlate

with increased risk for mental and physical health morbidity in adulthood, including shortened lifespan. These Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) were initially identified as seven categories of abuse or traumatic exposure encountered in the home environment prior to the age of 18 (Fellitti et al., 1998; Wade et al., 2016). Psychological, physical, and sexual forms of abuse in childhood were considered, as were exposures to substance abuse, mental illness, violence toward mother, and family member imprisonment (Felitti et al., 1996). Of significance is the finding by Felitti and colleagues that exposure to one of these ACEs predicted exposure to others, thereby increasing the likelihood of the outcomes identified above. Childhood adversities, however, are not limited to the home environment. Cronholm et al. (2015) found that community level traumatic childhood exposures such as witnessing neighborhood violence, experiencing racial discrimination, feeling generally unsafe, being bullied, or being in foster care, also contributed to mental and physical challenges that take root in childhood with consequences that extend into adulthood. These researchers further revealed that while the combination of household and community level traumas

correlated significantly with adult morbidity, exposure to community trauma often correlated with higher intensities of household and family traumas. The implication here is the coexistence of multiple recurring traumas for affected children (Landers et al, 2017; Navalta et al., 2018). Forke Young (2015) argues that several adversities would remain unreported were the ACE evaluation limited to experiences inside the home, which heightens the importance of also considering the extent and role of communal trauma in the lives of children. Since most children may not have the opportunity or capacity to clearly articulate and report the traumas to which they are subjected, susceptibility to exploitation in several domains is significantly dependent on the attachment experiences provided by adults in their lives.

Dr. Nadine Burke-Harris, California's first Surgeon General and the founder of the Steinberg Institute's Center for Youth Wellness (CYW), underscores the function of toxic stress in compromising mental, emotional, and physical functioning in children (Burke-Harris, 2018). The human stress-response system, which includes the nervous, endocrine, cardiovascular, and immune systems, are all

interconnected and critical to wellbeing, thriving, and optimal development. When repeatedly activated by chronic stress, these systems can initiate and maintain defensive responses that lose their effectiveness and benefit with time. Stress as used here refers to the physical or mental response to a triggering event or experience (i.e., a stressor) that is perceived as harmful, demeaning, threatening, or otherwise fear-inducing by the child (APA, n.d.). Emotional regulation is compromised; hypervigilance is intensified; inhibition and executive functioning are dulled, and the body's immune system is overtaxed (Burke-Harris, 2018). The result is suboptimal or dysfunctional responses in the service of safety-seeking, such as running away, truancy, substance use, or violent behavior (Landers et al., 2017).

Collectively, these stress responses can sabotage a child's development in physical, emotional, psychological, and social domains, and can be externally triggered, as in being verbally threatened or sexually violated, or internally triggered, as in the recollection of or rumination on a frightful event or combination of events. While children are typically resilient and may not be

significantly impacted by a single or mild stressful experience, recurring intense stressful events or experiences can substantially compromise resilience, and can facilitate the emergence of psychopathological symptoms. For example, Barbot et al. (2021) found that physical abuse can be predictive of suicidal attempts, while emotional and sexual abuse, when mediated by mood disorders and psychotic symptoms, can also result in suicidality in children. Harter (2012) notes that a child's constant alertness as a protective mechanism in the face of abuse and neglect prevents him from developing awareness of his own internal thoughts, needs and longings. Numbness to emotions tends to be the long-term result, which also contributes to an inhibited capacity for recall of personal experiences. The combination of the often-silent influences of socioenvironmental, sociocultural and multisystemic experiences (Bronfenbrenner 2005, 2009; Siegel, 2012), ACEs (Fellitti et al., 1998; Wade et al., 2016), and the subjective childhood sensory and cognitive interpretations of these experiences, shape personality characteristics that facilitate greater susceptibility to exploitation in some children.

Character Traits and Exploitation

Normal childhood development involves rapid growth in both neural and physical domains and the associated behaviors that demonstrate such growth. Prolonged exposure or subjection to intensely stressful experiences, along with inherited susceptibilities (i.e., epigenetic traits) can impede or retard normal growth in these domains (Harter, 2012; Siegel, 2012). How a child views herself and behaves is derived from the meaning ascribed to relational experiences with parents and influential attachment figures in the context of the ecosystems described by Bronfenbrenner. In the profile of mental functioning in children (MC), Lingiardi & McWilliams (2017) describe a range of mental capacities that guide behavior in several domains. These descriptors, while offering great nuance and detail (12 capacities for adults and adolescents; 11 for children), align well with the *Big Five*, the primary theoretical framework for understanding human personality (McCrae & John, 2002; Widiger, 2017). I will now briefly describe the five factors, in alignment with the profile capacities identified for children, in an attempt to highlight some childhood presentations of susceptibility to exploitation, or of

being exploited. The MC descriptor provided indicates the lowest rating, which would align with the greatest degree of susceptibility to exploitation. Regardless of a child's rating in any domain, nevertheless, exploitation can occur, given children's susceptibility to the control and guidance of adults and more empowered others. Bear in mind also that, for each descriptor offered, the possibility that behaviors, emotions, and cognitive processes may be the result of biological or neurological disorders completely unrelated to the security of relational foundations needs to be very carefully considered (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013).

Five Factors and the Profile of Mental Functioning for Children (MC)

1. *Conscientiousness*. This trait reflects strong executive function as evidenced by mastery of impulse-control, such as behavioral and emotional restraint, and goal-orientedness. Aimlessness, compromised reasoning, and irrationality may reflect a trait deficit.

- a. Conscientiousness aligns with the MC's *capacity for regulation, attention, and learning*, which is the ability to age-appropriately control behavioral impulses, maintain focus, and retain information. When these are severely compromised, children's attention spans are lower, they tend to be prone to agitation, may appear self-absorbed or withdrawn, their capacity to articulate clearly and coherently at age-level may be compromised, and they may exhibit learning difficulty.
- b. The MC's *capacity for affective range, communication, and understanding* also aligns with conscientiousness, and reflects a child's ability to age-appropriately describe and control emotions, and to distinguish between associated bodily sensations such as pleasure and pain. Children most impacted by negative primary experiences and therefore most vulnerable to exploitation may lack verbiage for their emotions or reasonable control over them, or their emotions may seem dulled. They may also have

visceral reactions to others’ attempts to describe their emotions, and the sensory distortion, in addition to misperceptions of intentionality may yield misguided proactive or reactive behavior, such as recoiling from a hug, mood swings, or a propensity for unprovoked aggression.

- c. Conscientiousness also includes the *capacity for impulse-control and regulation*, which reflects the child’s ability to use their developing executive functioning skills to resist either rash and uninhibited, or rigid, overcautious responses to experiences of discomfort in interactions with others. The absence or severe lack of these capacities would result in disruptive and erratic behavior, or equally dysfunctional muted behavior in response to sensed irritation or emotional discomfort. Either may involve resistance to or defiance of guidelines and consequences, and may result in relational strain with

important others, and potential physical harm, which can invite exploitation by empowered others.

2. *Agreeableness*. Reflecting the ability to interact reasonably with others, this trait engages relationship building and navigation, empathy, and other prosocial behaviors. Difficulty here would be evident in the challenge to effectively bond or interact, which may include heightened suspicion, low empathy, and defensive behaviors as control and hostility.
 - a. The MC's *capacity for mentalization and reflective functioning* is heavily dependent on early secure attachment experiences involving caregivers who consistently demonstrate good sensitivity to the child's verbal and nonverbal signals and emotional states, and who facilitate verbalizing such states through mirroring. The child learns to distinguish their own thoughts and feelings from those of others, and to adequately reflect and respond to the verbal and non-verbal signals of others. They do this with reasonable confidence gained from being afforded agency derived

from secure attachment. When a child's experience falls significantly short of this, there is little capacity to attune to the feelings or intent of others, which may appear as disinterest or unreasonably rigid and misguided interpretations of and responses to signals from others. The child may seem oblivious and insensitive to how their behavior affects others, and their affective world may appear extremely distorted or lacking. Conversely, a child may form and maintain inappropriate friendships.

- b. The *capacity for relationship and intimacy* highlights a child's inclination toward safe connection with others – individually in various encounters, such as with a parent, sibling, friend, teacher, or in a group context, such as school, church, or other community setting. A child's developing attachment style is an extremely helpful barometer for this domain, as it offers insight into how the child has learned to think of and encounter himself and others in relationship. When

severely impaired, expectations for caring and expressions of need may be excessively self-centered, attunement to others' needs may be noticeably dulled or absent, and the child's relational interactions may appear age-regressive. Children may also demonstrate excessively age inappropriate sexualization.

3. *Extraversion.* An individual's willingness to proactively engage with others and explore the environment is inherent in this trait. Self-confidence and openness to adventure would be on the high end of the spectrum, whereas, an aversion for social interaction or attention, and internalization of thoughts and feelings would reflect the opposite end.
 - a. In the MC, the *capacity for self-esteem regulation and quality of internal experience*, the child's self-concept as being independently sufficient as an individual (e.g., "my parents love me") and ability to interact with that awareness, encountering others as similarly sufficient yet distinct from the self is central. This may include the capacity to identify differences as non-malicious

(“I want to play with trucks, but my friend wants to jump-rope”) and to engage compromise or repair ruptures (e.g., “we can play jump-rope now, and then play with trucks” or vice-versa). Low view of self, as may be demonstrated in projection of the self-image onto others, for example, may be one indicator of struggle here, as may be low distress-tolerance. When the child feels accused, at fault, or otherwise self-assesses as culpable, for example, they may lash out verbally or behaviorally as a result. The use of defensive behaviors such as extreme idealization or devaluation, where the self or others are denigrated in comparison to a perceived or imagined perfect other, or omnipotent control, where the child’s desires and wants register to them as the only ones necessary or important, may also reflect intense difficulty in this domain. Possession of unexplained gifts can also be an indicator of deficiency in this capacity and consequent exploitative control.

4. *Openness to experience*. This involves the willingness to go beyond the known and comfortable; to utilize one's imaginative and reflective capacities; and to be intellectually challenged. This is contrasted by rigidity, a fear of exploration or difference, and a comfort in predictability and the known.

a. *Capacity to construct and use internal standards and ideals*: This MC domain reflects the ability to ascribe meaning to experience and activities, and to assess the self and personal undertakings as meaningful and worthwhile. While childhood meaning-ascription may be rudimentary, the presence of meaning for a developing child is still distinguishable from either its absence or gross distortion. Meaning-making is strongly hinged to a view of oneself as meaningful and valuable to others (Harter, 2012; Siegel 2012). Significant challenge in this domain may be reflected in unreasonably punitive self-assessment and devaluation of personal experiences and undertakings,

or a propensity for seemingly unreasonably destructive or rigid impulses and behavior, such as substance use or truancy. This child would struggle severely to offer age-appropriate reflections on feelings or experiences, increasing her vulnerability to exploitation.

5. *Neuroticism*. This trait reflects one's perception of the world or daily encounters as safe or survivable, and the self as capable of successfully navigating and working through situations faced.

- a. In the MC's *capacity for differentiation and integration*, differentiation is evident when a child is able to consciously separate thought from action, imagination from reality, and distinguish their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors from those of others. Integration is reflected in the increasing ability to ascribe meaning to thoughts and behaviors based on increasingly complex, albeit age-appropriate, and contextual thinking. The struggle to differentiate is evident when children find it difficult to separate

between internal and external experiences; or when the separation between the two is distinctively unrealistic. Ascribing internal fear or anger to others, rather than owning their emotions, is one way this difficulty can manifest. Context may also be evasive for the child, and globalization may result (“Everybody hates me!” as opposed to, “you are upset that I kicked the cat”). Here again, regressive functioning might be observed. Burke-Harris (2018) underscores the potential for the misalignment of a child’s biological age with its psychological or chronological age. Compromise, particularly of the biological or psychological ages heightens the potential for vulnerability to exploitation.

- b. *Capacity for defensive functioning.* For developing children, the senses of trust and autonomy (Erikson, 1963; 1980) can sometimes be excessively limited in the context of experiences framed by their dependence on others. Defensive strategies are behaviors used to preserve one’s sense of safety, to compensate for fear

or other vulnerable emotions, and to survive real and perceived threats. McWilliams (2011) identifies several primitive defenses, which are more instinctive, having developed much earlier in the life course, often prior to mastery of words, thoughts, emotions, or behaviors. Children severely challenged in this domain, particularly without a history of an adult modeling, assisting with and guiding regulative responses, can react with extreme withdrawal (mentally blocking out the current reality), acting out (enacting, rather than verbalizing, uncomfortable thoughts or feelings), dissociation (completely removing oneself from a traumatic experience by mentally disconnecting, e.g., assuming a different personality or reality), or other primitive defenses (see McWilliams, 2011 for further detail on defensive presentations). These may all heighten children's susceptibility to exploitation.

- c. The *capacity for adaptation, resiliency, and strength*, as with defensive functioning, is particularly consequential for appreciating children's vulnerability to exploitation. It speaks to one's proclivity toward resisting and withstanding adversity by engaging the mind in ways that preserve one's worth and tendency toward healing and growth. Developmental tasks such as agency, autonomy, and the ability to contextualize are drawn on here, as are the ways in which the child has witnessed demonstrations of resilience among primary attachment figures and in various ecosystemic environments. Children who may be the most at risk in this domain will tend to demonstrate poor, age-inappropriate responses to mild and moderate stressors, with potentially more intensely dysfunctional reactions to stressful encounters. A default to controlling behaviors, regardless of consequence, may also be attempted to protect the self.

- d. Finally, *self-observing capacities* engage a child's ability to appreciate him or herself in the context of the world of others. The ability to integrate, even at a basic level, components of abstract thought contribute to appreciating the self, as well as self and other in relationship (Harter, 2012; Siegel, 2012). This can be challenged by a low or evasive ability to contextualize or ascribe meaning to experiences and encounters, and may also include reduced or absent self-awareness or self-interest.

Summary and Conclusion

Consistent across all of these trait-deficiencies is the contribution of the quality of a child's early attachment experiences and how those experiences facilitate or impede accomplishment of the Eriksonian developmental tasks. The relational and bioecosystemic environments in which a child is immersed, and any biological or neurological deficiency impacting thinking, emotion, and behavior may also contribute to compromise in function, and therefore an increased susceptibility to exploitation through various forms of abuse

or neglect. Traumatic experiences may manifest as ACEs in the home as well as in the community, and can greatly contribute to a child's increased vulnerability to a range of exploitative acts. A child's attempts to self-protect using inadequately developed defensive mechanisms, or by mimicking inappropriate defenses, may contribute to exacerbation, rather than mitigation of exploitative abuse or neglect.

Reducing and eliminating the potential for child exploitation goes, therefore, beyond awareness of their vulnerabilities to promoting secure adult attachment relationships and healthy ecosystemic environments that foster optimal physical, emotional, and social connection and support for children. Consequently, protecting children from exploitation warrants careful attention to addressing adult psychological health needs with the goal of promoting earned secure attachment. This involves working toward resolving adults' unaddressed childhood traumas to assist them in offering the secure attachment needed to effectively model safety, validation, navigation of ecosystems, and freedom to explore for the children in their care.

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