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“Prevention of child maltreatment is the single most powerful way to improve the mental and physical health of our nation.”

– Dr. Putnam

OLD BEFORE THEIR TIME

A Scientific Life Investigating How Maltreatment Harms Children and the Adults They Become

Frank W. Putnam, MD

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Childhood trauma—particularly sexual abuse—has tentacles that reach into adulthood and across generations.

In a distinguished and sometimes controversial career that has encompassed research, treatment, and activism, child psychiatrist Frank W. Putnam has documented the long-term mental, physical, and social consequences of childhood maltreatment and neglect. Part memoir, part call to action, Dr. Putnam’s *Old Before Their Time* gives an inside look at a scientist negotiating the politics of established medicine and partisan politics in a quest to understand and heal wounded children and the adults they become.

Putnam co-founded the pioneering Female Growth and Development Study (FGDS), which for more than three decades has followed sexual-abuse survivors. The FGDS’s rare longitudinal data about everything from morbid obesity to mental illness has informed more than 60 peer-reviewed articles—as well as Bessel van der Kolk’s New York Times bestseller, *The Body Keeps the Score*. Childhood maltreatment, Putnam argues, “is the largest preventable cause of certain major mental illnesses, interpersonal violence, and much hard drug abuse.”

Some key takeaways from *Old Before Their Time*:

- **Individuals vary.** One group of abused girls in the FGDS engaged in risky sexual behavior, for instance, while another exhibited ambivalence and sexual repression. “Averaging” masks the impact of trauma.
- **Much abuse goes unreported.** Disclosure tends to happen over a long period of time, in fits and starts.
- **Childhood sexual abuse has wide-ranging mental, physical, and social effects, accelerating biological aging and adding to adversity as survivors mature.** Early and prolonged exposure to high



Frank W. Putnam, MD, is a child and adolescent psychiatrist and an internationally recognized expert on the health effects of child abuse and family violence.

- Professor of clinical psychiatry, University of North Carolina School of Medicine
- Emeritus professor of pediatrics and child psychiatry at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center
- Cofounder (with Penelope P. Trickett, Ph.D.) of the ongoing Female Growth and Development Study (FGDS)
- Author of 200+ published research papers and 4 books on dissociative disorders and child abuse

levels of stress hormones damages the brain and disturbs metabolism. Abused girls in the FGDS enter puberty earlier, show increased autoimmune activity, have a higher risk of morbid obesity, and reach a lower cognitive peak, followed by an earlier cognitive decline.

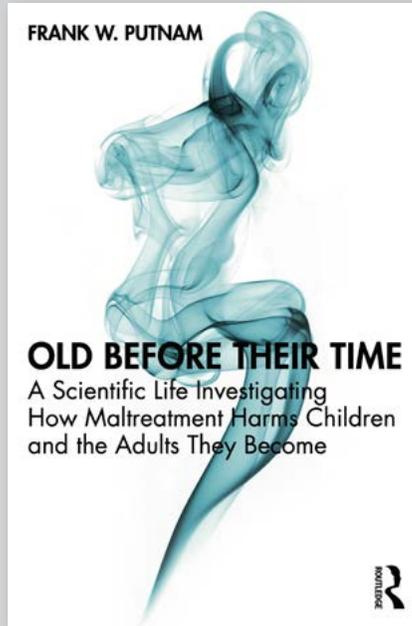
- **Childhood maltreatment has long-term and multigenerational consequences**, such as earlier sexual activity, drug use, depression, delinquency, menstrual and fertility problems, and reproductive cancers later in life.
- **Role models matter.** The strongest protective factor for girls, abused or not, is the number of positive relationships with older females.
- **Mothers deserve support.** Many mothers of sexually abused girls, according to the FGDS, have themselves been abused, or exposed to domestic violence or parental loss or separation. Early interventions such as home visits from social service professionals strengthen the maternal-child bond, a key contributor to resilience. Children with a supportive parent are three times more likely to disclose abuse.

Female Growth and Development Study (FGDS)

Together with the late Penelope K. Trickett, PhD., Dr. Putnam initiated the FGDS, a prospective longitudinal study of female incest victims, aged 6 -15 years at enrollment. The FGDS repeatedly evaluated the biological, psychological, and social development of the sexually abused and matched comparison girls, their children, and their mothers (three generations), over 35+ years. It identified numerous types of psychological disorders and biological and social dysfunction in subjects, providing new insight into how maltreatment embeds itself in a child's mind and body and is later expressed across generations. The study's staggering discovery is that childhood sexual abuse causes accelerated biological aging, increasing the risk for early onset of physical and mental conditions usually associated with late life.

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“A must read for anyone interested in understanding and alleviating human suffering.”

— Bessel van der Kolk, author
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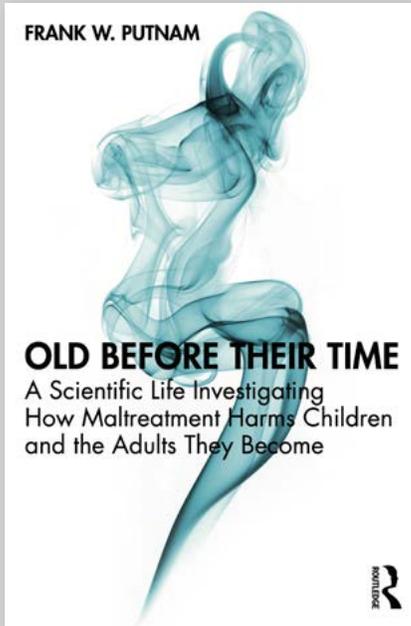
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SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR THE AUTHOR

1. How did your early focus on multiple personality disorder segue into a career studying, healing, and advocating for abused children?
2. What is unique about the ongoing longitudinal Female Growth and Development Study (FGDS) you cofounded, and what has been its most surprising finding?
3. And, as you ask, What about the boys?
4. What is “biological aging,” how is it measured, and what are its implications?
5. How does trauma “biologically embed” itself within victims and what are the social, psychological, and physical consequences?
6. What do you say to men and women who want to understand how what happened to them has impacted their bodies and minds?
7. Which trauma treatments work best—and for whom? Can resilience be learned?
8. In what ways do the effects of childhood sexual abuse cross generations?
9. How often do victims become perpetrators? Explain the “family cycle of violence.”
10. Who are the “child sexual abuse deniers” you say impede our ability to protect children?
11. What is it you feel the media gets “dangerously wrong” in its reporting about child maltreatment, and why does it matter?
12. What steps does Child Protective Services (CPS) take when it receives a report of child abuse? How can we make CPS investigations more “family friendly”?
13. What is your assessment of current child protection protocols, and how might AI assist in making them more effective?

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Visit Dr. Putnam's
[Psychology Today blog](#)

14. Pedophiles are using generative AI to create abuse content. How can the legal ambiguities around regulating tech companies and prosecuting predators be overcome?
15. How have you maintained the resilience and grit necessary to persevere in your work protecting vulnerable children from harm?
16. What are your recommendations for reducing and, ultimately, eliminating the scourge of child abuse and family violence in this country?

Frank W. Putnam, MD

Dr. Putnam is a professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine and an emeritus professor of pediatrics and child psychiatry at Children's Hospital Medical Center, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine.

Following completion of his residency in adult psychiatry at Yale University in 1979, Dr. Putnam joined the National Institute of Mental Health Intramural Research Program in Bethesda, Maryland, where he studied patients with multiple personality/dissociative identity disorder and noticed that large numbers of his adult patients had been abused as children. This led him to complete a fellowship in child and adolescent psychiatry and to focus his research on the psychological, biological, and social effects of child abuse. He co-founded the longitudinal Female Growth and Development Study (FGDS) in 1987, which is still ongoing, to assess the consequences of childhood sexual abuse on female development.

A leading authority on dissociative disorders, Dr. Putnam is the author of *Diagnosis and Treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder*, a perennial classic in the field of dissociative disorder diagnosis and treatment. He is currently involved in the development and dissemination of large-scale treatment and prevention programs for child trauma, pathological dissociation, postpartum depression, and family violence.

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