

The complexities of recognising and reporting emotional abuse in children

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Briefing

Key messages

- Emotional abuse is the one of the most harmful forms of child abuse and neglect. A child who experiences emotionally abusive behaviour is more likely to have maladaptive representations about themselves and the world. Consequently, they can experience difficulties in developmental transitions throughout their lifespan.
- Emotional abuse in the first two years of a child's life is associated with extremely significant difficulties at a later stage. These children are more impaired in many ways of functioning than children who are physically abused or neglected. Long term, children who have been emotionally abused have an increased risk of mental health problems in adulthood.
- Emotional abuse is difficult to define as it is extremely complex. Over the years professionals have struggled to reach a consensus as to what constitutes emotional abuse. In the last three decades there have been immense strides towards reaching an agreement.
- The prevalence of emotional abuse is inconsistent and estimates vary, literature contends that this form of maltreatment is more prevalent than anticipated. In the last five years Child Protection registrations of emotional abuse have substantially increased. However, emotional abuse is still under recognised and under reported especially if more explicit forms of abuse are involved.
- Several forms of child abuse and neglect often co-exist with emotional abuse or with each other. However, emotional abuse can exist as a standalone form of maltreatment. Emotional abuse can be driven out of the motivation of love for the child and there is often a lack of parental intent or motivation to harm a child. Therefore with the exception of a child being witness to domestic violence or trauma the basis of emotional abuse is that it is about the relationship between the child and caregiver rather than a single event.
- Emotional abuse is an individual experience and not all children and adults who experience emotional abuse will be affected in the same way. Individual resilience is a key factor in protecting a person from the harmful effects of emotional abuse.

Introduction

The very nature of emotional abuse makes it difficult to define as there are various modes of parental behaviour that encompass the abuse, which include acts of omission and commission^{1,4,10}. These behaviours include such acts as emotional and physical unavailability; unresponsiveness; withdrawal of attention; comfort, reassurance, encouragement and acceptance; and hostility, denigration, and rejection of a child^{1,2,4,10}. Other modes of emotional abuse include incongruous interactions with a child such as overprotection; unrealistic expectations; exposure to confusing or traumatic events and interactions; psychological neglect; failure to provide cognitive stimulation and opportunities to explore and learn; and involvement in criminal and corrupting activities that is supported by the parents, such as drug or alcohol related behaviour and prostitution³.

As there are so many parental behaviours and parent-child interactions embodied in emotional abuse and neglect it is not possible to create a single definition for this form of maltreatment⁴. To add to this complexity, at some time, nearly all parental and child interactions involve facets that could be described as emotionally or physically abusive⁵. Consequently, it is difficult to distinguish between good-enough and unacceptable harmful interactions particularly if the interactions are more subtle^{4,6}.

Why is this issue important?

There is now compelling evidence that emotional abuse is associated with negative developmental outcomes in early childhood that are disabling and enduring^{4,7,8,10}. Emotional abuse can create an environment of fear and uncertainty. Children often feel repressed as they cannot express a range of emotions to describe how they feel about a situation^{3,4,10}. Experiences of emotional abuse have been associated with powerful and enduring psychological sequelae, including shame, humiliation, anger, feelings of worthlessness and emotional inhibition^{4,7,8}.

Agreement on a comprehensive definition of emotional abuse has always been elusive and consequently more tangible forms of abuse such as physical abuse and neglect for many years have taken precedence^{4,9,10,12,13,15}.

What does the research tell us?

Over the last two decades there has been a growing clinical and research interest into emotional abuse and its detrimental impact on child welfare and development^{4,10,11} and there has been a significant increase of children registered under the category of emotional abuse on the child protection registers¹⁴. Yet evidence suggests that it remains under recognised and under reported^{4,10}. It is still an area that professionals struggle to identify and report especially if more explicit forms of abuse are involved^{2,3,4,7,10}.

Possible reasons for lack of recognition and reporting

There is a *lack of consensus on the definition* as the very nature of emotional abuse makes it very difficult to define as it is multifaceted and complex^{3,4,6,7,8,10}. Clinicians and researchers cannot agree on a single definition^{2,3,4,10} and there is a *lack of agreement regarding terminology*^{10,13}. There are many other terms that are closely associated with emotional abuse, such as psychological abuse, psychological maltreatment,

mental cruelty and verbal abuse¹³. How these terms are used by professionals or which term should be used can cause confusion amongst professionals and along with the lack of consensus on a definition emotional abuse is *poorly defined in legal terms*^{9,10}.

It has been proposed that the lack of definition for emotional abuse may be due to *professional hesitancy caused by individual attitudes and bias*¹⁰. Studies suggest that professionals may compare evidence of emotional abuse to their own experiences and therefore their own underlying personal beliefs could influence their response^{4,10}. This can be further complicated by the frequency of emotional abuse and the way that it is intrinsically incorporated in the caregiver child relationship that is characteristic of this form of maltreatment. Studies suggest that these factors can lead professionals to question its harmfulness and seriousness^{2,3,9,10}.

Research proposes that there are *so many parental behaviours and child interactions* that are encapsulated with emotional abuse that it is not possible to give it a single definition⁴ and nearly all parental-child interactions involve facets that could be described as emotionally abusive^{4,5}. There are periods of time when many parents are emotionally unavailable, distracted, or make unkind comments so it is often difficult to differentiate between what is deemed *good enough and acceptable to unacceptable and harmful interactions*^{4,6,10,11}.

Effects of emotional abuse

Studies have shown that psychologically unavailable parenting is the most harmful form of maltreatment^{4,10,20} as it can seriously compromise a child's development by punishing positive normal behaviours such as smiling or exploration and it can inhibit the development of interpersonal skills necessary for adequate performance outside the family environment^{4,16,17}. However, parental acts that are deemed emotionally abusive or emotionally neglectful will have different effects in the different developmental stages of infancy, early childhood, school age and adolescence¹⁸. Studies show children with maladjusted histories are less likely to cope with stress and with regulating their emotional state^{10,19,20}. When a child is exposed to abusive experiences that are stressful or traumatic their brain will try to accommodate the situation by becoming hyper-aroused and ultimately dissociated, in an attempt to reduce or stop intolerable stress²¹. The more severe the maltreatment the child endures the more likely their brain will be 'wired' for the experience of threat²². The earlier a child is exposed to abusive situations the more likely

it is the brain's hard wiring will be fundamentally shaped for fight or flight²¹. The experience of the abused or traumatised child is one of fear, unpredictability and pain. The experiences of abusive treatment result in hyper-arousal and can lead to hyper-vigilance²¹. Research has indicated that emotional abuse is particularly damaging for a child's self-esteem²³ due to the belittling nature of the maltreatment and the fact that it directly targets a child's worth through internalisation of sustained negative criticism²⁴.

Evidence has shown that not all children are affected by the harmful interactions of emotional abuse. Individual resilience, temperament, the resourcefulness of the child to overcome adversity, and the presence of a trusted non-maltreating person in the child's life can explain why some children are affected and others are not¹¹.

Implications for practice

Greater awareness and understanding of emotional abuse would be valuable in ensuring that children's psychological needs are met and to avoid the detrimental impact of this form of abuse.

Given the complexities of defining emotional abuse, research has identified that conceptual or definitional frameworks are needed rather than a single definition^{4,10}. Current research is focussing on bringing clarity to this area of concern. Suggested pathways that involve conceptual frameworks, therapeutic intervention and specific training for professionals are being delivered and evaluated for their effectiveness¹¹.

As emotional abuse is often about a relationship than an event the more subtle forms of emotional abuse often do not come to the attention of Child Protection teams yet long-term these forms are just as detrimental. However, intervention does not necessarily have to be by Child Protection agencies and can often be dealt with by addressing the issues regarding parenting skills. Current research proposes for a major paradigm shift to a public health framed approach to child protection²⁶. This public health approach addresses the issues that the protection of the child requires a preventative approach, whereby the child is free from maltreatment compared to previous child protection intervention which has focussed on the child that has already been maltreated²⁶.

Evidence suggests that the implementation of preventative interventions that address the occurrence of emotional abuse along with therapeutic based interventions to prevent recurrence is the way forward²⁷. Research proposes that multi-level interventions or methods of working should incorporate targeting parenting practices, and identifying pre-disposing factors that could affect the child's care giver capabilities such as mental health problems, domestic abuse, or substance misuse^{4,10,27}.

As there are so many parental/caregiver behaviours incorporated in emotional abuse therapeutic intervention can differ according to the type and severity of harmful interaction^{4,10,11,26,27}.

Further resources

Agencies should work together in responding to concerns of all forms of maltreatment. The National Guidance for child protection in Scotland 2010 is a guide for professionals on how to respond to concerns early and effectively. It focuses on making sure that practice is consistent and of a high quality <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/12/09134>

A summary of the clinical features both physical and psychological of all forms of maltreatment is provided in the guidance document When to suspect child maltreatment. This guidance has been devised to raise awareness and help health care professionals who are not specialists in child protection: <http://www.nice.org.uk/CG89>

The resilience of children is vitally important when dealing with issues of emotional abuse and all other forms of maltreatment. The national programme, getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) contains the resilience matrix. This helps professionals to make sense of assessment information and evaluate children's needs.

http://www.playfieldinstitute.co.uk/information/pdfs/publications/government_scotland/the_Guide_to_Getting_it_right_for_every_child_section4.pdf

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About this briefing

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