

Child Emotional Maltreatment

Identifying child emotional maltreatment and intervening

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Child Abuse: An Overview

For every seven kids, at least one has experienced child abuse or neglect in the last year, and the lifetime economic impact of child abuse and neglect was roughly \$428 billion in 2015 (CDC, 2020). Unfortunately, this is likely an underrepresentation of the issue because abuse is often hidden and unreported due to fear, stigma, and lack of societal acceptance. Further 80% of abuse is perpetrated by parents or parental guardians (Norman, et al., 2012).

Child abuse and neglect comes in four common types:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect

What is Child Emotional Maltreatment?

Emotional maltreatment is a complex issue, and as such, there is debate over its definition and the criteria that must be present. Unfortunately, this lack of consensus on the definition makes identifying emotional maltreatment and intervening a challenge. It is often reserved for severe situations (Smith Slep, Heyman, & Snarr, 2011). Emotional maltreatment encompasses both emotional abuse and emotional neglect. Below are pieces of common definitions, helping create a full definition:

- “Refers to behaviors that harm a child’s self-worth or emotional well-being” (CDC, 2020).
- Isolated incidents and behavioral patterns are both included (Norman, et al., 2012).
- No physical contact with child required (Glaser, 2002).
- “Motivation to harm the child is not necessary” (Glaser, 2002).
- The act and impact are both required (Smith Slep, Heyman, & Snarr, 2011).
 - Impacts include:
 - Significant fear reactions
 - Significant psychological distress
 - Potential psychological harm
 - Significant developmental disruptions
 - Somatic symptoms that interfere with normal functioning.

These definitions are flawed, and some would argue they are either over restrictive, particularly with impact being required, or under restrictive, since a pattern is not required (Smith Slep, Heyman, & Snarr, 2011). Regardless, emotional maltreatment is not as evident as other forms of maltreatment, and there is more room for interpretation. If a child comes to school bruised, there is a clear indication of physical abuse, which is not present for emotional maltreatment. Further, children have different levels of resilience, clouding the threshold for harmful impact. Thus, emotional maltreatment is difficult to identify and address.

The Signs and The Consequences

Short-Term Consequences and Signs of Child Emotional Maltreatment

Signs of emotional maltreatment can be difficult to recognize, and they can vary child-to-child. Nonetheless, there are indicators of child development impairment in emotionally abused and neglected children:

Glaser, 2002:

Emotional State:

- Unhappy / low self-esteem
- Frightened
- Distressed
- Anxious

Behavior:

- Oppositional / resistant
- Too many responsibilities for age
- Attention seeking
- Anti-social / delinquent

Developmental / Educational Attainment:

- Underachievement
- School non-attendance / lateness

Peer Relationships:

- Withdrawn or isolated
- Aggressive

Physical State:

- Physically neglected or unkempt
- Small stature or poor growth
- Other (soiling, abdominal pain)

Other:

- Sexualized behavior

Maguire, et al., 2015:

Emotional State:

- Difficulty attributing and regulating emotions
- Lower levels of emotional understanding
- Lower ego resiliency (difficulty adapting to changing environmental demands)
- Internalizing: withdrawn, bodily complaints
- Do not express negative emotions

Behavior:

- Externalizing: aggressive, assaultive, destructive
- School disciplinary problems and suspensions

Caregiver Relationships:

- Disrupted relationship
- Child is emotional, anxious, and insecure in the relationship

Peer Relationships:

- Poor social skills
- Difficulty making friends

Physical State:

- ADHD more common

Long-Term Consequences of Child Emotional Maltreatment

Although research is limited compared to other forms of maltreatment, emotional maltreatment is linked to several health outcomes, some with robust evidence and others with weaker evidence (Norman, et al., 2012):

Robust Evidence:

- Depressive disorders
- Anxiety disorders
- Suicide attempt
- Drug use
- STIs / risky sexual behavior

Inconsistent Evidence:

- Eating disorders
- Type II diabetes
- Obesity
- Smoking
- Alcohol problems

Limited Evidence:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Schizophrenia
- Headache / migraine

What To Do

As seen in the lists of short-term and long-term consequences above, emotional maltreatment can have large and lasting impacts on children. Additionally, these are only the consequences we know about. Due to the lack of reporting and intervention, a lot of emotional maltreatment goes unnoticed and, with that, unresearched.

Because of these lasting and severe impacts, I argue that, as a society, we need to better define emotional maltreatment, raise awareness surrounding it, and put systems in place to both identify emotional maltreatment and intervene to stop it. Further, a focus on preventative measures early on would create a safer environment for the child to grow-up in, sparing emotional trauma to the child and enhancing emotional maltreatment identification and intervention resources.

Intervening

Who is responsible?

It is the parent's responsibility to ensure a healthy and nurturing parent-child relationship. However, if a parent is unable to fulfill this responsibility, others must intervene on behalf of the child (Glaser, 2002). Because parents are often unaware of their behavior's harm (Pekdogan & Kanak, 2019), more responsibility is placed on others to create awareness and intervene, and as a society, we need to put the systems and resources in place to do this.

Why is there a lack of intervention?

Why emotional maltreatment is under recognized and intervention is delayed (Glaser, 2002):

- Arbitrary and inconsistent definitions for emotional maltreatment
- Belief that the term "abuse" is unnecessarily critical and problematic in an emotional context
- Reluctance to "callout" caregivers
- The maltreater is likely the primary caregiver and, thus, an attachment bond may be disrupted
- No physical harm to the child
- Difficult to prove emotional maltreatment in court
- Challenges in recognizing emotional maltreatment, although not to the extent previously thought

Further adding to this problem is a lack of adequate assessment tools (Pekdogan & Kanak, 2019).

Future Direction: What do we do?

While these may be challenges, they can be overcome with the right attention and hard work both systemically and culturally. Systemic changes must be made to properly train professionals, screen parents and children, and better support victims in the court room. Further, cultural changes must be made to perceive emotional maltreatment with the same urgency as physical maltreatment, to view intervention as helpful, and to normalize conversations surrounding emotional maltreatment.

Reporting by Professionals

Since parents cannot necessarily be relied on to identify and report emotional maltreatment, others are called upon for this responsibility (Glaser, 2002). These people may simply be community members, but generally, professionals—including teachers, police officers, lawyers, and social workers—would seem best equipped to identify and intervene on emotional maltreatment cases. Unfortunately, only about 58% of emotional abuse cases are reported by these professionals (Pekdogan & Kanak, 2019).

This is a less than ideal percentage, so why are professionals not reporting more cases? For teachers, the answer is discomfort: they are uncomfortable informing child protection services due to a lack of knowledge regarding indicators, uncertainty regarding reasonable grounds for suspicion, not wanting to show concern, and fear that there are other childhood conditions at play (Maguire, et al., 2015). Seeing as teachers interact with their students regularly, they are ideal identifiers and interveners when it comes to child emotional maltreatment. Thus, this lack of confidence in reporting is highly concerning.

Future Direction: What do we do?

Since the reasons for professionals' lack of reporting are known, at least for teachers, it is now essential to address those reasons and create better outcomes. To help teachers better recognize indicators of emotional maltreatment and identify when there are reasonable grounds for suspicion, more training on the topic can be provided. Addressing the uncertainties around showing concern and fears of other conditions being present will likely need a cultural change. Feelings of concern regarding emotional maltreatment and being able to report them needs to be normalized. If people do not express their concerns, children will continue to be emotionally maltreated because there is no intervention.

Screening Tools

A 2019 study developed a new measurement tool to determine the emotional abuse potential of parents. This tool has two sub-dimensions: (1) the casual sub-dimension to "measure parents' behaviors causing emotional abuse toward their children" and (2) the preventive subdimension consisting of "items about parents' preventing emotional abuse toward their children". With this, parents' potential to display emotional abuse and prevent emotional abuse can be evaluated (Pekdogan & Kanak, 2019).

Future Direction: What do we do?

If a tool such as this is used to reliably and quickly screen for potential and current emotional abuse, childhood outcomes can be improved, and maltreatment rates will be lowered. Perhaps if a screening questionnaire for parents was included in a child's annual check-up, potential emotional maltreatment cases could be prevented, and current emotional maltreatment scenarios could be halted. The issue here is one parent may complete the screenings while the other parent has the concerning behaviors. Regardless, the tools to tackle this issue exist, and there is no excuse to not incorporate them.

Final Thoughts

Emotional maltreatment is highly prevalent today and has lasting impacts on children. Unfortunately, it is underreported and under-addressed, meaning many children continue to be emotionally maltreated because there is no intervention. As a society, we need to better define emotional maltreatment, raise awareness surrounding it, and put systems in place to both identify the maltreatment and intervene to stop it. These systems may include better training for professionals and regular screening of parents by a child's primary care physician. Further, raising concern for emotional maltreatment must be normalized and supported, allowing people to be comfortable bringing suspicions forward and protecting children.

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