

# Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ): A New Scale for Measuring Emotional Abuse and Psychological Maltreatment<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Emotional abuse is the core of all other kinds of child abuses and maltreatments. The significant and serious outcomes of other kinds of abuses are often due to the emotional aspects. Moreover, emotional abuse has several forms, and each form may lead to different adverse outcomes for children and adolescents. Unfortunately, there is not a comprehensive instrument to assess all categories of emotional abuse. A 30-item self-report questionnaire was developed for ages 12 years and older. The sample included 328 students aged 12 to 19 years selected randomly from students referred to different student counseling centers. Exploratory factor analysis categorized the scale into six subscales. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed that all items were fitted with the subscales significantly. Content and concurrent validity demonstrated good validity and reliability for each subscale. Overall reliability was also significantly acceptable.

**Key words:** emotional abuse, maltreatment, child abuse, questionnaire.

Emotional abuse is the core of, and is comorbid with, all types of child abuse, including physical or sexual abuse and neglect of children (Spertus, Yehuda, Wong, Halligan, & Seremetis, 2003). It is suggested that the adverse outcomes of all forms of abuse mostly result from the emotional aspects (Kent & Waller, 2000). Nowadays people

are cautioned by different mental health organizations and media to avoid punishing their children physically, and to protect them from sexual abuse. Nevertheless, most parents and caregivers are not aware of emotional abuse and its serious adverse outcomes (Al-Shail, Hassan, Aldowaish, & Kattan, 2012; Hart & Glaser, 2011; Palusci &

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<sup>1</sup>This questionnaire was approved as a part of Vahid Momtaz's PhD thesis at University Putra Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup>The researchers appreciate Fars Organization of Education for their coordination obtaining permission for the researchers to collect data from their psychology clinics. The authors are especially grateful to the Fars Education Organization clinic managers for their coordination with the researchers.

Ondersma, 2012). Unfortunately, some people may even use some types of emotional abuse, such as overexpectation and control, as advanced upbringing methods. Despite this, most investigations on child abuse have focused on physical and sexual abuse. They have considered emotional abuse as a part of other types of abuse (Simmel & Shpiegel, 2013). Consequently, emotional abuse has not received as much attention as other forms of abuse (Egeland, 2009; Fernandopulle & Fernando, 2003; Festinger & Baker, 2010; Wright, Crawford, & Del, 2009). This study attempted to address this gap by developing a new comprehensive scale to assess all forms of emotional child abuse.

Limited attention to emotional abuse is largely due to the lack of a unique definition for this concept. Different researchers have suggested various definitions for “emotional abuse” based on two approaches: caregivers’ behaviors and outcomes of abusive behaviors (Hamarman, Pope, & Czaja, 2002; Hornor, 2012; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009). Consequently, the variety of definitions has led researchers to use different terminologies, like “emotional abuse,” “psychological maltreatment,” “psychological abuse,” and “verbal abuse” (Glaser, 2002; O’Hagan, 1995). In this article, the term “emotional abuse,” based on caregivers’ abusive behavior, is used. In the present study, Hornor’s (2012) definition is used. According to Hornor, psychological abuse is a repetitive pattern of interaction between one or more caregivers and the child that causes emotional and psychological damage to the child.

Another important reason why less attention has been paid to emotional abuse is the lack of a strong and comprehensive measurement instrument on this subject. This issue not only leads to diverse and sometimes completely different statistics on emotional abuse (Trickett et al., 2009), but also contributes to a shortage of research on this subject. Although there are some studies that have led to development of questionnaires specified to emotional abuse, all of them were targeted to assess adults (Postmus, Stylianou, & McMahon, 2015; Shepard & Campbell, 1992; Zink, Klesges, Levin, & Putnam, 2007), not

children and adolescents. This seems to be a consequence of considering child abuse as a single concept without measuring each type comprehensively and separately. Emotional abuse is a very broad, complex, and multidimensional concept that requires more specific attention. Most of the current measurements for the abuse and trauma of children and adolescents have been developed to assess all types of abuse at the same time, such as the Child Abuse and Trauma Scale (Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995) and the Child Trauma Questionnaire (Bernstein & Fink, 1998). Consequently, there are only a few items about emotional abuse (Brassard, Hart, & Hardy, 1993; Engels & Moisan, 1994).

Furthermore, emotional abuse is not a concept to describe a special type of behavior but covers a variety of behaviors. For categorizing emotional abuse, several researchers and organizations have divided emotional abuse into different behaviors with different terminology. For instance, based on information from the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, Allen (2008) suggested different categories of emotional abuse, such as spurning, aggressive rejection, degradation, corrupting and exploiting, isolating, neglecting of child’s health and educational needs, and terrorizing. He advised that each type of abuse may lead children and adolescents toward different outcomes. For example, he states that while terrorizing is connected with anxiety and psychosomatic pain, ignoring by caregivers may result in depression and borderline personality disorder. Wright et al. (2009) also categorized emotional abuse as “commission types” (verbal abuse, spurning, terrorizing, and isolating) and “omission types” (ignoring, unresponsive behavior toward child’s needs, and being unavailable). Furthermore, the Public Health Agency of Canada specified two main categories of emotional abuse: neglectful tactics and deliberate tactics (Doherty & Berglund, 2015). Denying emotional responsiveness, discounting, ignoring, denying or forgetting, minimizing or trivializing, lack of control, and rejecting are types of neglectful tactics; and accusing/blaming, overcontrol and inconsistent

(60.40%; age range, 12–19 years;  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.67$  years,  $SD = 1.49$  years) and 130 males (39.60%; age range, 14–18 years;  $M_{\text{age}} = 16.21$  years,  $SD = 1.18$  years).

To prepare the questionnaire, different steps were utilized. For the first step, we considered all types of categorizations of emotional abuse. The present study is based on the Wright et al. (2009) approach and Glaser's (2011) categorization of emotional abuse. Wright et al. divided emotional abuse into the abovementioned omission and commission categories. Glaser, on the other hand, categorized psychological abuse according to caregivers' misbehaviors, and divided it into five categories: (a) emotional neglect, unavailability, and unresponsiveness; (b) hostile, denigrating, rejecting, or blaming interaction toward the child; (c) developmental overexpectation and inappropriate or inconsistent expectation from the child, unstable discipline, and conflicting and confusing interaction with the child; (d) use of the child for caregivers' needs, terrorizing, exploiting, and emotional black points (i. e., forcing the child to follow orders by exploiting their weaknesses or revealing their secrets); and (e) isolating or prohibiting the child from having adequate interactions with peers by overcontrol. Considering these categorizations, we prepared some items representative of each type of abusive behavior. Importantly, each category covers different abusive behaviors and we tried to cover all those behaviors in that category. The questions were prepared to assess (a) verbal abuse (degrading, humiliating, nominating, ridiculing, criticizing), (b) emotional rejection, (c) overcontrol, (d) unstable control, (e) lack of control, (f) isolating, (g) overexpectation, and (h) terrorizing (corrupting and exploiting, using the child for caregivers' needs, and emotional black points). However, statistical methods that were used in this study extracted six categories out of eight. The categories "Overcontrol" and "Isolating" merged together as "Overcontrol," and "Unstable control" and "Lack of Control" merged together as "Insufficient control" (Table 1).

The targeted population for this study was children and adolescents who had potentially been exposed to emotional abuse. The rate of child abuse is significantly higher among families experiencing vulnerabilities and problems (Levey et al., 2017; Pasalich, Cyr, Zheng, McMahon, & Speiker, 2016). Therefore, the respondents in this research were selected from students who were referred to student counseling centers and who were identified as having family problems by the psychologists and counselors in Fars Province, Iran. There are 12 student counseling and psychological service centers that belong to the educational ministry in Fars Province. From those, four centers were selected randomly. According to examinations of the files of students who had been referred to these centers within the previous 3 years, there were 1,325 students who had been identified as having family problems and 400 of them were selected randomly. The ethics statement was obtained from the Ministry of Education. Invitation letters for participating in the study along with an ethics letter about confidentiality of personal information and parents'/caregivers' permission were sent to these students. Finally, 328 students participated in the study (age range, 12–19 years;  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.42$  years,  $SD = 1.49$  years), 198 females

**Table 1** Emotional Abuse Questionnaire subscales specification and definition

Subscale	Definition
Verbal Abuse	Happens when individuals are harassed verbally, and may be seen in different types, such as: Belittling: Verbal behaviors of caregivers by which the child feels inferior and worthless (degrading, minimizing). Humiliating: Shaming the child and humiliating him/her for each unacceptable speech or behavior or for every failing in his/her activities (shaming). Nominating: Naming the child faultily and contemptuously. Criticizing: Criticizing all of the child's behavior as faulty or wrong. Ridiculing: Belittling or criticizing the child in a ridiculing manner.
Emotional Rejection	Failing or refusing to accept the child and to prepare a warm and loving environment for the child (ignoring, rejecting, coldness, cruelty, and emotional unresponsiveness).
Overcontrol	Isolating: Prohibiting the child from communicating with his/her social group and preventing him/her from obtaining social experiences or making friendships. Dominating: Depriving the child of reasonable autonomy to decide on their desires or activities.
Insufficient Control	Lack of control: Failing to control the child's behavior and performance. Inconsistent control: Sometimes very obsessive about what the child may do, whereas other times paying no attention to them at all (contradictory control).
Overexpectation	Expectations beyond the child's abilities (abusive expectation, high demanding).
Terrorizing	Using the child for the caregivers' needs: Forcing the child to satisfy caregivers' needs by threatening them. (Following orders and buying cigarettes are some samples of this abusive behavior.) Emotional black point: Forcing the child to follow orders by exploiting their weaknesses or revealing their secrets. Corrupting: Encouraging and forcing the child to participate in antisocial and illegal demeanors (exploiting).

As Rattray and Jones (2007) declared, a questionnaire should follow parsimony rule by which the items should be adequate and as brief as possible. This means that the number of items should cover all concepts that are supposed to be assessed, but should not be so long as to produce exhaustion and avoidance in respondents. To follow the parsimony rule in the present study, we attempted to provide the items that are representative of all types of caregivers' emotional abuse behaviors. Hence, 30 self-report items were prepared for students aged 12 years and older and named the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ).

The items were written in Persian language and scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*always*). The present translation was applied by the translation of the questionnaire into English by three professionals with PhDs in English language and then three other

PhDs of English language translated it back to Persian separately.

**Results**

The validity of the EAQ was determined with two methods. The first method was content validity in which the questionnaire and the purpose of study with the brief literature on child emotional abuse was sent to one professional with a PhD in psychology, one professional with a PhD in counseling, and one professional with a PhD in sociology (who has published a book on the social behavior of adolescents and youth) from several universities in Iran, as subject matter expert raters (*SMEs*; Lawshe, 1975). Their opinions about the necessity of each item were gathered to estimate the content validity ratio (*CVR*). The formula that Lawshe (1975)

suggested for *CVR* is  $\frac{n_e - N}{N}$ , where  $n_e$  = number of *SME* panelists who indicated the item as “essential” and  $N$  = the total number of *SME* panelists. *CVR* values are ranged between +1 and -1; if the value for an item is positive, it indicates that a minimum of half of the *SMEs* evaluated the item as crucial.

Only one of the panelists did not mark Items 9, 10, 11, 18, 26, and 27 as essential. So, the results for all items are +1, except for the abovementioned items, for which the *CVR* is +0.33, equally. Moreover, the mean of the *CVR* for all items, which could be used as a gauge of complete test content validity, was +0.87.

The second method of validating was concurrent validity in which the new questionnaire should be correlated positively and significantly with one of the approved questionnaires. Since there was no comprehensive emotional abuse questionnaire, the emotional abuse section of the Child Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ; Bernstein & Fink, 1998) was completed by students along with the EAQ. Bernstein and Fink (1998) reported high reliability and validity for their whole questionnaire as well as for each category of the CTQ. Since the purpose of this study was to develop an emotional abuse measurement, the emotional abuse part of the CTQ was applied for concurrent validity. The result showed their correlation at 0.87, which is significantly high and acceptable. The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and it was .93.

Maximum likelihood extraction model of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was utilized to determine the questionnaire's subscales. However, as Kootstra (2004) declared, it is too difficult to extract and name categories based on factor extraction of EFA. He debated that to confirm the categories, the factor rotation loading is essential. To rotate the loading, at first the oblimin method of extraction was utilized in which it is assumed that the categories are correlated with each other. The correlations between the subscales were not significant. Hence, the varimax method from orthogonal rotation for uncorrelated factors was conducted. According

to Hayton, Allen, and Scarpello (2004), each item that has a factor loading of more than 0.4 can be considered as an item that belongs to that category. All items in the subscales have good factor loading. Although eight categories were included at the first level, EFA extracted just six factors and integrated Lack of Control (Items 6, 16, and 26) and Unstable Control (Items 8 and 18) into one category, which was named Insufficient Control. Also, Overcontrol (Items 5, 15, 25, and 30) and Isolating (Items 4, 14, and 23) were integrated into one category named Overcontrol (Table 2).

The eigenvalues for the factors explained 61% of cumulative variance. The adequacy of sample size that was estimated by Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin of sampling adequacy (*KMO*; .89) and Bartlett's test (chi-square 2,891.56,  $df = 435$ ,  $p < .001$ ) showed that the sample size had enough efficiency. The *KMO* was significant at  $p \leq .001$ .

Item analyzing was applied for all categories. Meanwhile, as it is supposed that each type of emotional abuse has a unique outcome and it might be different from the other types, inter-scale item analysis was used for each subscale separately (Table 3). According to the results of item analysis, none of the items needed to be deleted, because the Cronbach coefficient of the total questionnaire, as well as the inter-scale Cronbach coefficient, did not increase if items were deleted.

Finally, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was held on to assess the relevancy of the items with their scales via AMOS SPSS 20. The weight of each factor in its proposed scale is presented in Figure 1. As it appeared from the model, all items had a loading effect of more than .50 except for Item 16, which had .49. The  $CMIN/df$  ( $\chi^2/df$ ) = 2.42, goodness-of-fit index = .84, comparative fit index = .94, Tucker–Lewis index = .93, and root-mean-square error of approximation = .07 demonstrate that the model was fitted adequately. Although the goodness-of-fit index should be more than .90, according to Albright and Park (2009), if just three indicators out of these five are fitted, the model fit is acceptable (Figure 1).

**Table 2** Rotated factor matrix

Items	Verbal Abuse	Overcontrol	Terrorizing	Insufficient Control	Emotional Rejection	Overexpectation
2	<b>.90</b>	-.09	-.03	.05	.02	-.01
11	<b>.90</b>	-.04	-.07	.07	.06	.02
1	<b>.87</b>	-.06	.02	.05	-.07	.03
3	<b>.87</b>	-.02	-.02	.03	-.04	-.01
17	<b>.86</b>	-.11	.04	.03	.02	-.03
21	<b>.84</b>	-.02	.05	-.01	.02	-.05
12	<b>.80</b>	-.18	.02	.03	-.06	-.06
7	<b>.79</b>	-.08	-.03	.04	.08	-.02
4	-.09	<b>.94</b>	-.04	-.04	-.09	-.08
14	-.11	<b>.93</b>	.02	-.05	-.07	-.08
23	-.09	<b>.91</b>	-.06	-.01	-.14	-.11
30	-.09	<b>.77</b>	.15	.09	.10	.07
5	-.03	<b>.73</b>	.03	.05	.05	.07
15	-.04	<b>.71</b>	.11	.06	.10	.10
25	-.11	<b>.70</b>	.14	.03	.07	.05
29	-.01	.02	<b>.92</b>	.05	-.02	-.01
24	-.03	.05	<b>.90</b>	.11	-.02	.03
10	.01	.09	<b>.79</b>	.08	.03	.10
20	.01	.14	<b>.73</b>	.13	.03	.08
8	.01	.12	.01	<b>.91</b>	.02	-.05
18	.08	.13	-.04	<b>.89</b>	.04	.04
6	.02	.03	.06	<b>.66</b>	.04	.02
26	.03	.01	.13	<b>.63</b>	.07	-.03
16	.06	-.12	.16	<b>.50</b>	-.00	-.05
22	-.00	.01	-.01	.05	<b>.94</b>	.03
28	.03	.03	.03	.07	<b>.92</b>	.02
13	.00	.02	.01	.05	<b>.90</b>	-.05
19	.01	.05	.07	-.01	-.03	<b>.86</b>
9	-.05	.01	.05	-.05	.05	<b>.82</b>
27	-.04	-.01	.06	-.01	-.03	<b>.78</b>

Note. Extraction method: maximum likelihood. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy = .862, Approx. chi-square = 8,786.40,  $df = 435$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop a comprehensive instrument to measure all aspects of emotional abuse of children and adolescents. Reliability scores are quite acceptable by two methods. According to data from the item analysis, no items needed to be deleted and all items in both the total questionnaire and the inter-scale analysis were valuable. At first, we proposed Isolating and Dominating as different categories, according to some previous categorizations. However, the EFA did not support this idea and we integrated these categories consequently. Although Items 4, 14, and 23 were

targeted to assess isolating behaviors and Items 5, 15, 25, and 30 were prepared to assess dominating behaviors, EFA merged them to become one category named Overcontrol. This seems reasonable as dominating and isolating can be considered as behavioral demonstrations of overcontrol. This procedure happened for Lack of Control (Items 8 and 18) and Inconsistent (Unstable) Control (Items 6, 16, and 26) as well. It means that while we considered these two concepts as different subjects, EFA put them in a one category named Insufficient Control. Interestingly, CFA demonstrated a good model fit for these categorizations also, while if we consider them as the separate categories, the model

**Table 3** Item statistics and analyzing of Emotional Abuse Questionnaire

Subscale	Item	M	SD	Item correlation with total items	Item inter-scale correlation	Inter-scale Cronbach's $\alpha$ if item deleted	Cronbach's $\alpha$ for each subscale
Verbal Abuse	1. Those around me get in a fight with me.	2.1	1.0	.59	.63	.85	.87
	2. Those around me have rebuked me while talking to me or communicating with me since my childhood.	1.8	1.2	.58	.75	.84	
	3. Those around me did not or do not take my words seriously.	1.97	1.20	.60	.64	.85	
	7. When I make a mistake, I get blamed.	2.15	1.17	.53	.52	.87	
	11. Since my childhood, I have been treated in such a way that I feel devalued.	2.30	1.29	.53	.69	.85	
	12. Those around me used to call me bad names or they still do.	1.60	1.3	.52	.52	.87	
	17. Those around me ridiculed or still ridicule my deeds and words.	2.35	1.20	.40	.65	.85	
Emotional Rejection	21. Whatever I do, people nag at me.	2.25	1.20	.49	.61	.86	.81
	13. Those around me did not or do not take my comments and suggestions into consideration.	2.58	1.41	.43	.61	.78	
	22. Those around me are being cold to me.	.87	1.23	.45	.69	.69	
	28. Those around me reject my feelings toward them.	1.90	1.23	.64	.66	.73	
Overcontrol	4. My parents or one of my family members used to forbid me from having relationships with my friends or they still do.	1.55	1.19	.44	.64	.71	.83
	14. Those around me used to ban me from participating in social groups or they still do (sport clubs, art clubs, etc.).	1.98	1.19	.60	.66	.69	
	23. Those around me believe I should not have a relationship with anyone except my relatives.	1.87	1.20	.61	.60	.75	
	5. Those around me used to strongly take me under their control or they still do.	1.87	1.19	.68	.57	.83	
	15. Those around me did not or do not allow me to decide about my daily chores.	1.61	1.37	.38	.72	.76	
	25. Those around me did not or do not allow me to decide about my field of study.	1.69	1.20	.66	.68	.77	
	30. Those around me did not or do not allow me to choose my personal things based on my own taste and style.	2.38	1.27	.59	.67	.79	
Insufficient Control	6. Those around me did not or do not care about what I did or what I do.	2.37	1.39	.45	.60	.68	.75
	16. Those around me did not or do not have any control or supervision on my relationships or what I do.	1.25	1.20	.54	.51	.71	
		2.01	1.26	.61	.41	.75	

Table 3 Continued

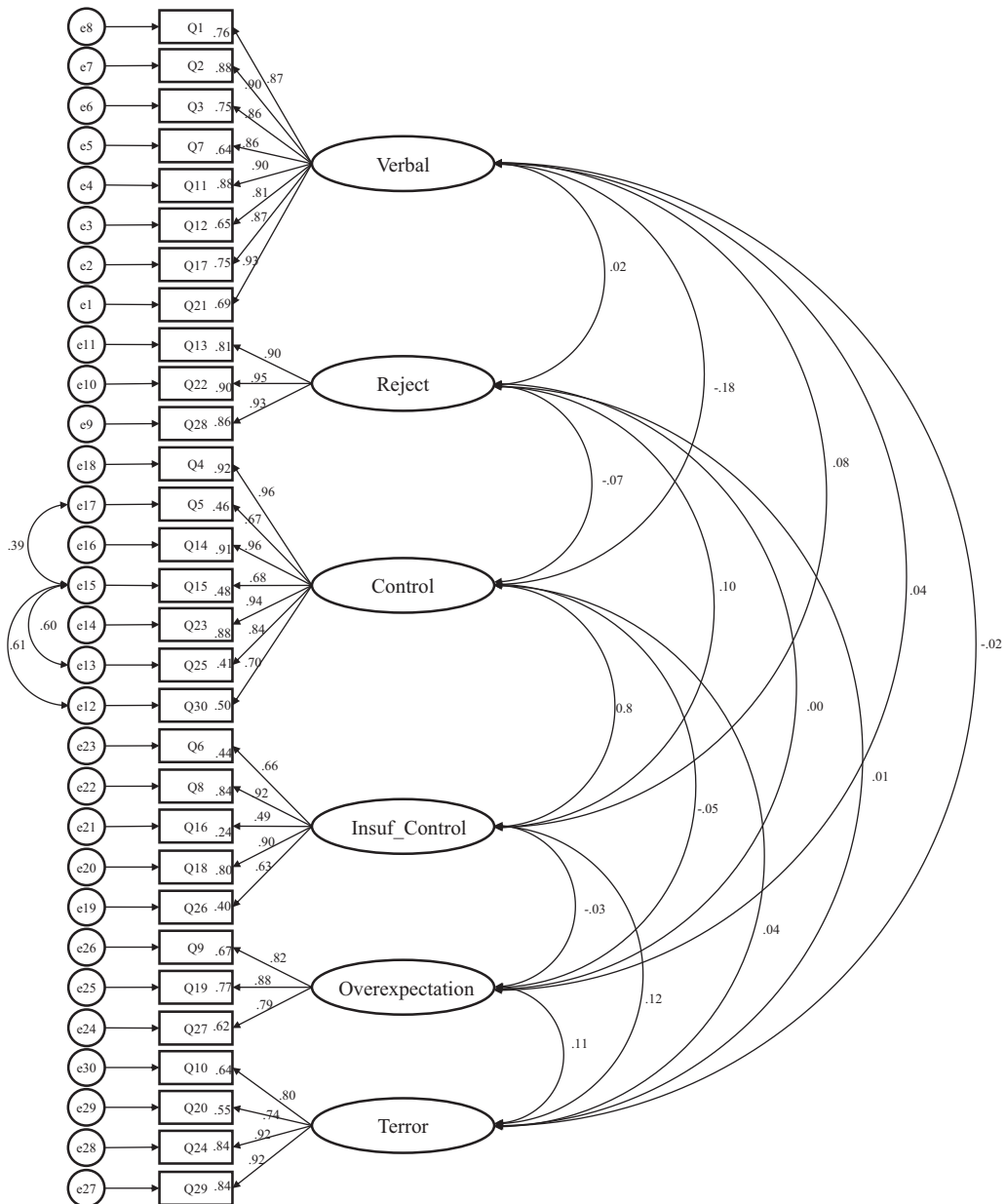
Subscale	Item	M	SD	Item correlation with total items	Item inter-scale correlation	Inter-scale Cronbach's $\alpha$ if item deleted	Cronbach's $\alpha$ for each subscale
Overexpectation	26. Those around me kept or keep themselves busy and I was not or am not one of their concerns.	1.89	1.17	.60	.47	.73	
	8. The behaviors of those around me are unpredictable.	2.03	1.29	.50	.61	.68	
	18. Those around me are sometimes very obsessive about what I do, whereas other times do not pay attention to me at all; their twofold behaviors have left me confused.						
	9. Those around me used to expect me to gain results beyond my abilities in my studies or they still do.	.63	1.01	.34	.60	.69	.77
Terrorizing	19. Those around me used to expect me to behave beyond my potential or they still do.	1.76	1.23	.65	.65	.62	
	27. I have a feeling that I cannot fulfill my family's expectations.	1.57	1.35	.54	.56	.74	
	10. Since childhood, I was forced to do things that are not acceptable by society (like buying cigarettes).	2.16	1.19	.47	.66	.81	.84
	20. Since childhood, I was forced to do things I did not want to, otherwise those around me threatened to reveal my weak points in front of others.	1.97	1.26	.65	.60	.84	
	24. Those around me have led me to do immoral things since childhood.	.60	1.04	.35	.74	.78	
	29. Those around me have led me to mischief since childhood.	1.97	1.20	.64	.75	.77	

Note. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  if item deleted for all items = 0.93.



fit is not obtained. It is noticeable that just Item 16 in the Insufficient Control category with .39 factor loading in EFA is less than .4, which is

the least acceptable factor loading according to Pituch and Stevens (2012). The factor loading for this item in CFA is .49 and less than the



Relative Chi-Sq ( $\leq 5$ ) = 2.42, RMSEA ( $\leq .08$ ) = .066, GFI ( $\geq .9$ ) = .84, CFI ( $\geq .9$ ) = .94, TLI ( $\geq .9$ ) = .93

**Figure 1** Standardized regression weights: (group number 1 – default model).

threshold, which is .5. However, the shortage of factor loading is too trivial to omit it and, as Field (2009) declared, it is not essential to delete an item if it just loses the factor loading significance, since the factor loading is just one indicator, not the complete indicator, of the item. All other items have sufficient factor loading in both EFA and CFA. Remarkably, none of the items overlapped with the other factors and consequently, if we look at covariance between the subscales in the CFA, which is between  $-.18$  and  $.12$ , it is understood that factors are independent of each other. This issue supports our primary implication that psychological abuse is not a singular concept with consistent outcomes but rather that different types of this behavior have different consequences. Also, these findings support the idea of the importance of preparing this scale by which the assessment of psychological abuse in different categories is possible.

The limitation of this study is that it was carried out on a sample of just 328 adolescents. More research in different statistical societies is needed to reinforce the results of this questionnaire. Furthermore, since this study was on Iranian students only, the Iranian cultural background might have influenced the results.

## Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study demonstrate that emotional abuse covers a wide range of abusive behaviors that are completely different, and that children may consequently develop different adverse outcomes. The present study prepared a scale by which all aspects of emotional abuse can be assessed. Also, the results of this study suggested a new categorization of emotional abuse according to a statistical analysis base.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

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(Received January 16, 2019; accepted August 31, 2020)