

Definition of Emotional Abuse:

From: National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect

The National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect defines emotional abuse as: "acts or omissions by the parents or other caregivers that have caused, or could cause, serious behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or mental disorders. In some cases of emotional abuse, the acts of parents or other caregivers alone, without any harm evident in the child's behavior or condition, are sufficient to warrant child protective services (CPS) intervention. For example, the parents/caregivers may use extreme or bizarre forms of punishment, such as confinement of a child in a dark closet. Less severe acts, such as habitual scapegoating, belittling, or rejecting treatment, are often difficult to prove and, therefore, CPS may not be able to intervene without evidence of harm to the child."²³

The American Medical Association AMA describes Emotional Abuse as: "when a child is regularly threatened, yelled at, humiliated, ignored, blamed or otherwise emotionally mistreated. For example, making fun of a child, calling a child names, and always finding fault are forms of emotional abuse."²

Emotional abuse is more than just verbal abuse. It is an attack on a child's emotional and social development, and is a basic threat to healthy human development. Emotional abuse can have many forms:

Belittling

Belittling a child causes the child to see him or herself in the way consistent with the caregivers words. This limits the child's potential by limiting the child's own sense of his or her potential.

Coldness

Children learn to interact with the world through their early interactions with their parents. If parents are warm and loving, children grow to see the world as a secure place for exploration and learning. When parents are cold to their children, they deprive the child of necessary ingredients for intellectual and social development. Children who are subjected to consistent coldness grow to see the world as a cold, uninviting place, and

will likely have seriously impaired relationships in the future. They may also never feel confident to explore and learn.

Corrupting

When parents teach children to engage in antisocial behavior, the children grow up unfit for normal social experience.

Cruelty

Cruelty is more severe than coldness, but the results can be the same. Children need to feel safe and loved in order to explore the world around them and in order to learn to form healthy relationships. When children experience cruelty from their caretakers, the world ceases to "make sense" for them, and all areas of learning are affected - social, emotional, and intellectual development are hindered.

Extreme Inconsistency

The foundations of learning are laid in the first interactions between child and caretaker. Through consistent interactions, the child and parent shape each other and the child learns that his or her actions have consistent consequences - this is the foundation for learning. The child also learn to trust that his or her needs will be met from others. When the caretaker is inconsistent in his or her response to the child, the child cannot learn what is expected from the start, and all areas of learning can be effected throughout the child's lifespan.

Harassment

Harassment has similar effects to those of belittling, but also involves a stress response. Harassment scares the child, and repeated exposure to fear can alter the child physically, lowering their ability to deal with other stressful situations.

Ignoring

Ignoring a child deprives the child of all the essential stimulation and interaction necessary for emotional, intellectual and social development.

Inappropriate Control

Inappropriate control takes three forms - lack of control, over control, and inconsistent control. Lack of control puts children at risk for danger or harm to themselves and robs children of the knowledge handed down through human history. Over control robs children of opportunities for self-assertion and self-development by preventing them from exploring the world around them. Inconsistent control can cause anxiety and confusion in children and can lead to a variety of problematic behaviors as well as impair intellectual development.

Isolating

Isolating a child, or cutting them off from normal social experiences, prevents the child from forming friendships and can lead to depression. Isolating a child seriously impairs their intellectual, emotional and social development. Isolating is often accompanied by other forms of emotional abuse and often physical abuse.

Rejecting

When a caretaker rejects a child, the caretaker is negating the child's self-image, showing the child that he or she has no value. Children who are rejected from the start by their caretakers develop a range of disturbed self-soothing behaviors. An infant who is rejected has almost no chance of developing into a healthy adult.

Terrorizing

Terrorizing, like harassment, evokes a stress response in children. Repeated evocation of the stress response alters the child physically, lowering their ability to fight off disease, increasing their risk for many stress-related ailments. Aside from the physical affects, a child living in terror has no opportunities to develop anything other than unhealthy and anti-social survival skills.

Emotional abuse is the core of all forms of abuse, and the long-term effects of child abuse and neglect in general stem mainly from the emotional aspects of abuse. Actually, it is the psychological aspect of most abusive behaviors that defines them as abusive. Think of a child breaking his or her arm. If the arm was broken while riding a bicycle and trying to jump a ramp, the child will heal and recover psychologically, perhaps strengthening his or

her character and learning valuable life-lessons in the process by overcoming obstacles with the support of his or her caregivers and friends. If the same injury occurs because a parent twists the child's arm behind his or her back in a rage or throws the child down the stairs, the child will heal physically, but may never heal psychologically. In thinking of sexual abuse, think of a child being examined by a doctor - doctors touch children's genitals routinely in physical examinations without damaging children in any way. But think of the same contact from a sexualized older acquaintance. It is clear that the damage from fondling the child is psychological and emotional. Now think of a child who lives with a parent who terrifies the child but who has just enough control (IT'S ALL ABOUT CONTROL) over him- or herself to refrain from injuring the child physically in a way that will draw questions. That child is suffering the same devastating abuse as the children in the examples above, but often nothing can be done about it.

Despite the fact that the long-term harm from abuse is most often caused by the emotional aspects of the abuse, emotional abuse is the most difficult of the forms of abuse to substantiate and prosecute. Actual physical injury is often required before the authorities can step in and assist a child. Also, the effects of abuse are very similar to symptoms of many childhood mental and physical disorders, which makes identifying emotionally abused children difficult.