



Information sheet 3

Emotional Abuse is a Child Protection issue

Child abuse is more than bruises or broken bones. While physical abuse is shocking due to the scars it leaves, not all child abuse is as obvious. Behaviours from caregivers that can result in emotional harm to the child are often harder to detect and quantify and the resultant impact on the child harder to see. It can sometimes also be harder to relate the child's resulting emotional distress directly back to the abusive behaviours. Emotional abuse adversely impacts on children's development in the short, medium and longer term. For these reasons it is likely that emotional abuse is the most common and the most under-reported of all forms of abuse and therefore the type of abuse most likely to result in ongoing harm from generation to generation.

Definition

Emotional abuse is referred to in the professional literature by many interchangeable terms such as: emotional abuse, covert abuse, psychological maltreatment, coercive or ambient abuse.

Emotional abuse is the sustained, repetitive, inappropriate, ill treatment of a child or young person through behaviours including: threatening, isolating, discrediting, belittling, teasing, humiliating, bullying, confusing, ignoring and inappropriate encouragement ¹. Sustained with-holding of love, emotional nurturance and affection, also constitutes emotional abuse.

Emotional abuse can also include a repeated pattern of damaging interactions between parent(s) and child that becomes typical of the relationship; when a parent constantly criticises, insults, threatens and rejects the child and/or conveys to a child that he or she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another's needs ².

Behaviours that may contribute to a pattern of emotional abuse

The following sustained behaviours, alone or collectively, can seriously interfere with a child's cognitive, emotional, psychological or social development.

- **Ignoring.** Either physically or psychologically, the parent or caregiver is not present to respond to the child, and may not look at the child or call the child by name.
- **Rejecting.** An active refusal to respond to a child's needs (e.g. refusing to touch a child, denying the needs of a child, ridiculing a child).
- **Terrorizing.** The parent or caregiver creates a climate of fear for the child. Terrorizing can include threatening or bullying the child; placing the child or the child's loved one (such as a mother, sibling and/or pet) in a dangerous or chaotic situation, such as ongoing domestic violence, or placing rigid or unrealistic expectations on the child with threats of harm if they are not met.
- **Isolating.** The parent or caregiver consistently prevents the child from having normal social interactions with peers, family members and adults which may include confining the child or limiting the child's freedom of movement.

¹ Guidelines for Protecting Children 2015. WA Health

² Kairys & Johnson (2002). The Psychological Maltreatment of Children – Technical Report. In *Pediatrics* 2002; 109.4

- **Exploiting or corrupting.** The parent or caregiver teaches, encourages or forces the child to develop inappropriate or illegal behaviours. It may involve self-destructive or antisocial acts of the parent or caregiver, such as teaching a child how to steal or forcing a child into prostitution.
- **Verbally assaulting.** This involves constantly belittling, shaming, ridiculing or verbally threatening the child.

Emotional Abuse is traumatic

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed whereas repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the developing personality. The child trapped in an emotionally damaging environment is trapped in a life of repeated trauma. The potential impact on the developing child of growing up in such a damaging environment **cannot be overstated**, and is usually understated and under-reported.

Some facts about the short and longer-term impact on children subjected to emotional abuse

A chronic pattern of emotional maltreatment destroys or, in the case of emotional abuse from early childhood, prevents the initial development of a child's sense of self-worth and personal safety. This can lead to the following adverse effects:

- Damage to a child's intellectual faculties and processes including: intelligence, memory, recognition, perception, attention, imagination and moral development.
- Damage to physical health including; failure to thrive, somatic complaints, poor adult health, and high mortality.
- Impaired social skills including; attachment problems as a child and adult, reduced capacity for empathy and the establishment of healthy relationships, self-isolation.
- Reduced capacity to self-soothe; leading to a reliance on external influences e.g drugs and alcohol.
- Feelings of being unloved and unlovable, worthless and unwanted; feeling distressed and despairing. Such feelings might be difficult to recognise in the child as such children are likely to also have a reduced capacity to appropriately feel and express emotions.

Remember:

- Emotional abuse is under recognized and under-reported and therefore has the potential to have the most widespread and significant impact on children's wellbeing.
- Every child has two parents; whilst the parent who is present may have engaged in behaviour psychologically/emotionally damaging to the child, they may still be more committed to trying to parent adequately than the absent parent.
- The focus needs to be on assessing the psychologically/emotionally abusive behaviours and the impact on the child, rather than focussing on what may have been the intent behind the actions of the adult/parent.
- Any single behavioural indicator should not necessarily be interpreted as positive confirmation of emotional abuse.

Whenever a health professional has clear concerns of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and/or neglect happening to the child they are seeing, or any other child in the family, they have a responsibility to take action to ensure that protective measures are put in place.

Refer to *Guidelines for Protecting Children 2015* for further information and guidance