

Preventing Child Emotional Abuse

Child emotional abuse is a misunderstood, insidious, and psychologically damaging form of child maltreatment, which can lead to low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and self-destructive behavior.

We, as a nation and as individuals, have the collective responsibility to promote strong and healthy families, thereby preventing child emotional abuse. To accomplish this, we must strengthen services that prevent child abuse and neglect and support children and families. And we must promote research, training, and public education to address the risk factors that can lead to child emotional abuse and to foster the factors that protect against it.

Prevent Child Abuse America Advocates for:

● **Increasing research efforts to gain a clear understanding of the origins, nature, and risk factors of child emotional abuse.** The current understanding of child emotional abuse is tentative at best. An increased understanding of child emotional abuse is essential before researchers and practitioners can begin crafting policy and interventions aimed at addressing child emotional abuse.

● **Increasing research so that family support programs can effectively address child emotional abuse.** Despite evidence indicating that child emotional abuse has long-term and serious impacts on children's development and social functioning, little attention has been paid to how best to spare children from child emotional abuse.¹

Programs and activities, such as home visiting programs and parent mutual support self-help groups, hold potential for preventing child emotional abuse² by offering education on childhood development, instruction on non-violent discipline methods, and methods on how to bond with and nurture children. However, such potential has largely been left untapped. Research must be devoted toward making such programs more effective in preventing child emotional abuse.

● **Raising public awareness on what is currently known about the severity, prevalence, and warning signs of child emotional abuse.** Despite the growing awareness and acknowledgement of child emotional abuse as a societal problem, many Americans still do not fully grasp the nature, scope, and severity of child emotional abuse. Therefore, public awareness campaigns must be launched, which explain the nature, scope, and severity of child emotional abuse and how members in communities across the country can prevent it. It is important that such campaigns focus on de-marginalizing the problem by showing that everyone has the potential to become an emotional abuser, and that all caretakers have the responsibility to be self-aware and judicious when they interact with their children.

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● **q Making mental health services available to both victims and perpetrators of child emotional abuse to prevent the intergenerational transmission and future perpetuation of child emotional abuse.**

In many cases, children face severe and potentially long-term emotional and psychological consequences as a result of child emotional abuse. Mental health services to the victims, especially in the early stages of abuse, can help ease some of these consequences and may help curb the intergenerational transmission of child emotional abuse. Mental health services to perpetrators can help them deal with the stressors that often lead to emotional abuse and may lessen the frequency and severity of such abuse.

Background

Definition of Child Emotional Abuse

Child emotional abuse does not leave immediate physical marks on the child. It instead damages the child's feelings, self-worth, and cognitive abilities.³ Because the effects of child emotional abuse are hidden, there is significant variability and disagreement on its definition, prevalence, and severity.⁴ Compounding the confusion surrounding emotional abuse is that it is the least studied form of child maltreatment.⁵

Given such difficulties, Prevent Child Abuse America endorses an "action-based" definition. The following categories of emotional abuse serve as a useful starting point:⁶

- **Rejecting:** The adult refuses to acknowledge the child's worth and the legitimacy of the child's needs.
- **Isolating:** The adult cuts the child off from normal social experiences, prevents the child from forming friendships, and makes the child believe that he or she is alone in the world.
- **Terrorizing:** The adult creates a climate of fear, bullies and frightens the child, and makes the child believe that the world is capricious and hostile.
- **Ignoring:** The adult deprives the child of essential stimulation and responsiveness, stifling emotional growth and intellectual development.
- **Corrupting:** The adult encourages the child to engage in destructive and antisocial behavior, reinforces deviance, and makes the child unfit for normal social experience.
- **Verbally Assaulting:** The adult humiliates the child with constant name-calling, harsh threats, and sarcastic comments that continually "beat down" the child's self-esteem.
- **Overpressuring:** The adult imposes consistent pressure to grow up too fast and to achieve too early in the areas of academics, physical/motor skills, and social interaction, which leaves the child feeling that he or she is never quite good enough.

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In addition, frequent exposure of children to family violence and unwillingness or inability to provide affection or stimulation to the child in the course of daily care may also result in emotional abuse.⁷

Scope of Child Emotional Abuse

In the year 2001, approximately 61,778 (6.8 percent of all substantiated cases of maltreatment) children in the United States were officially counted as victims of child emotional abuse.⁸ It is likely that such numbers greatly underestimate the problem of child emotional abuse, since most cases of emotional abuse likely remain unreported.

Nature of Child Emotional Abuse

Although scant research has been conducted on the causes of child emotional abuse, experts speculate that it occurs for many of the same reasons that physical abuse does.⁹ A single factor alone often does not lead to abuse; instead, parents are vulnerable to becoming involved in maltreatment when simple, everyday stresses in their lives build up or if they are unable to manage such stresses.¹⁰ Such stressors to parents include: fatigue, unemployment, poverty, social isolation, divorce, death, immaturity and inexperience, health crises, and mental health problems.¹¹ Parents may also have diminished capacity for understanding or dealing with children, false ideas about children's needs, and, in extreme cases, sadistic psychosis.¹²

Consequences of Child Emotional Abuse

The consequences of child emotional abuse can be devastating and long-lasting, and include: increased risk for a lifelong pattern of depression, estrangement, anxiety, low self-esteem, inappropriate or troubled relationships, or a lack of empathy.¹³ During their childhood, victims may fail to thrive or their developmental progress may be halted.

Further, research indicates that it is the emotional and psychological trauma associated with physical and sexual abuse that has the most detrimental impact on the development of children.¹⁴ One study indicated that 80 percent of respondents who had experienced sexual abuse in combination with physical and/or emotional abuse felt that the emotional abuse was most damaging in the long-term.¹⁵ Similar findings were confirmed by case studies of men allegedly sexually,¹⁶ physically, and emotionally abused by caregivers while in boarding school.

Children may recover from the physical pain and injuries, but may have a more difficult time recovering from the degradation, humiliation, or breach of trust involved in child emotional abuse.¹⁷

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Additional Resources

- ¹Tomison, A.M. & Tucci, J. (1997). Emotional abuse: The hidden form of maltreatment. *Issues in Child Abuse Prevention*, 8. Melbourne, Australia: National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Available online at <http://www.aifs.org.au/nch/issues8.html>.
- ²Ibid.
- ³Ibid.
- ⁴Ibid.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Garbarino, J., Guttman, E., & Seeley, J.W. (1986). *The Psychologically Battered Child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Pearl, P. (1994). Emotional abuse. In A.E. Brodeur & J.A. Monteleone (Eds), *Child Maltreatment: A Clinical Guide and Reference*. St Louis: GW Medical Publishing.
- ⁷Tomison, A.M. & Tucci, J. (1997). Emotional abuse: The hidden form of maltreatment. *Issues in Child Abuse Prevention*, 8. Melbourne, Australia: National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Available online at <http://www.aifs.org.au/nch/issues8.html>.
- ⁸U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *Child Maltreatment 2001*. Available online at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/publications/cm01/outcover.htm>.
- ⁹Prevent Child Abuse America. (1999). *Fact Sheet: Emotional Child Abuse*. Available online at http://www.preventchildabuse.org/learn_more/research_docs/emotional_child_abuse.pdf.
- ¹⁰Ibid.
- ¹¹Ibid.
- ¹²Ibid.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴Tomison, A.M. & Tucci, J. (1997). Emotional abuse: The hidden form of maltreatment. *Issues in Child Abuse Prevention*, 8. Melbourne, Australia: National Child Protection Clearinghouse. Available online at <http://www.aifs.org.au/nch/issues8.html>.
- ¹⁵Ibid.
- ¹⁶Ibid.
- ¹⁷Ibid.

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