



## American Humane Fact Sheet

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### Emotional Abuse

#### What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse of a child is commonly defined as a pattern of behavior by parents or caregivers that can seriously interfere with a child's cognitive, emotional, psychological, or social development. Emotional abuse of a child — also referred to as psychological maltreatment — can include:

- *Ignoring.* Either physically or psychologically, the parent or caregiver is not present to respond to the child. He or she may not look at the child, and may not call the child by name.
- *Rejecting.* This is 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).
- *Isolating.* The parent or caregiver consistently prevents the child from having normal social interactions with peers, family members, and adults. This also may include confining the child or limiting the child's freedom of movement.
- *Exploiting or corrupting.* In this kind of abuse, a child is taught, encouraged, or forced to develop inappropriate or illegal behaviors. It may involve self-destructive or antisocial acts of the parent or caregiver, such as teaching the child how to steal or forcing a child into prostitution.
- *Verbally assaulting.* This involves constantly belittling, shaming, ridiculing, or verbally threatening the child.
- *Terrorizing.* Here, the parent or caregiver threatens or bullies the child and creates a climate of fear for the child. Terrorizing can include placing the child or the child's loved one (such as a sibling, pet, or toy) in a dangerous or chaotic situation, or placing rigid or unrealistic expectations on the child with threats of harm if they are not met.
- *Neglecting the child.* This abuse may include educational neglect, where a parent or caregiver fails or refuses to provide the child with necessary educational services; mental health neglect, where the parent or caregiver denies or ignores a child's need for treatment for psychological problems; or medical neglect, where a parent or caregiver denies or ignores a child's need for treatment for medical problems.

While the definition of emotional abuse is often complex and not precise, professionals agree that, for most parents, occasional negative attitudes or actions are not considered emotional abuse. Even the best

of parents have occasions when they have momentarily "lost control" and said hurtful things to their children, failed to give them the attention they wanted, or unintentionally scared them by their actions.

What is truly harmful, according to James Garbarino of the Family Life Development Center at Cornell University and a national expert on emotional abuse, is the persistent, chronic pattern that "erodes and corrodes a child." Dr. Arthur Green, director of the Family Center at the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City, concurs that emotional abuse is not an isolated incident. "We're talking about the kind of things that a good mother may do 10% of the time, but a troubled mother does 80% or 90% of the time."

#### Why does it happen?

Emotional abuse can, and does, happen in all types of families, regardless of their background. Most parents want the best for their children. However, some parents may emotionally and psychologically harm their children because of stress, poor parenting skills, social isolation, lack of available resources, or inappropriate expectations of their children. They may emotionally abuse their children because the parents or caregivers were emotionally abused themselves as children.

#### What are the effects of emotional abuse?

Douglas Besharov states in *Recognizing Child Abuse: A Guide for the Concerned* that "Emotional abuse is an assault on the child's psyche, just as physical abuse is an assault on the child's body." Children who are constantly ignored, shamed, terrorized, or humiliated suffer at least as much, if not more, than if they are physically assaulted. Danya Glaser (2002) finds that emotional abuse can be "more strongly predictive of subsequent impairments in the children's development than the severity of physical abuse."

An infant who is severely deprived of basic emotional nurturance, even though physically well cared for, can fail to thrive and can eventually die. Babies with less severe emotional deprivation can grow into anxious and insecure children who are slow to develop and who have low self-esteem.

Although the visible signs of emotional abuse in children can be difficult to detect, the hidden scars of this type of abuse manifest in numerous behavioral ways, including insecurity, poor self-esteem, destructive behavior, angry acts (such as fire setting and animal cruelty), withdrawal, poor development of basic skills, alcohol or drug abuse, suicide, difficulty forming



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### Emotional Abuse (*continued*)

relationships, and unstable job histories.

Emotionally abused children often grow up thinking that they are deficient in some way. A continuing tragedy of emotional abuse is that, when these children become parents, they may continue the cycle with their own children.

#### Identifying and preventing emotional abuse

While some children may experience emotional abuse only, without ever experiencing another form of abuse, emotional abuse typically is associated with and a result of other types of abuse and neglect, which makes it a significant risk factor in all child abuse and neglect cases. Brassard, Germain, and Hart (1987, as cited in Pecora et al., 2000) assert that emotional abuse is “inherent in all forms of child maltreatment.”

Emotional abuse that exists independently of other forms of abuse is the most difficult form of child abuse to identify and stop. This is because child protective services must have demonstrable evidence that harm to a child has been done before they can intervene. And, since emotional abuse doesn't result in physical evidence such as bruising or malnutrition, it can be very hard to diagnose.

Researchers have developed diagnostic tools to help professionals who work with children and families identify and treat emotional abuse. Professionals are taught to identify risk factors for emotional abuse, ask appropriate questions about a family's history and the family's present behaviors, and provide appropriate resources (such as financial resources, mental health services, or parenting classes) to help parents and caregivers create safe, stable environments for their children and themselves.

#### What you can do

All children need acceptance, love, encouragement, discipline, consistency, stability, and positive attention. What can you do when you feel your behavior toward your child is not embodying these qualities but is bordering on emotional abuse? Here are some suggestions:

- Never be afraid to apologize to your child. If you lose your temper and say something in anger that wasn't meant to be said, apologize. Children need to know that adults can admit when they are wrong.
- Don't call your child names or attach labels to your

child. Names such as “Stupid” or “Lazy,” or phrases like “Good for nothing,” “You'll never amount to anything,” “If you could only be more like your brother,” and “You can never do anything right” tear at a child's self-esteem. A child deserves respect.

- Address the behavior that needs correcting and use appropriate discipline techniques, such as time outs or natural consequences. Be sure to discuss the child's behavior and the reason for the discipline, both before and immediately after you discipline. Discipline should be provided to correct your child's behavior, rather than to punish or humiliate him or her.
- Compliment your child when he or she accomplishes even a small task, or when you see “good behavior.”
- Walk away from a situation when you feel you are losing control. Isolate yourself in another room for a few minutes (after first making sure the child is safe), count to 10 before you say anything, ask for help from another adult, or take a few deep breaths before reacting.
- Get help. Support is available for families at risk of emotional abuse through local child protection services agencies, community centers, churches, physicians, mental health facilities, and schools.

#### References

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#### Resources

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- Feild, T., and Winterfeld, A. (2003). Guidelines on abuse—emotional abuse. *Tough problems, tough choices: Guidelines for needs-based service planning in child welfare*. Englewood, CO: American Humane and Casey Outcomes and Decision-Making Project.

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**American Humane is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the mission of protecting children and animals from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. For more information or to lend your support, please visit [www.americanhumane.org](http://www.americanhumane.org) or call (866) 242-1877.**