



# Distinguishing between poor/dysfunctional parenting and child emotional maltreatment<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This paper was intended to distinguish between poor parenting and child emotional maltreatment (CEM), to inform child welfare and public health policymakers of the need for differentiated responses.

**Methods:** Scientific literature was integrated with current practice and assumptions relating to poor/dysfunctional parenting and child emotional maltreatment, with a primary focus on the parent-child relationship context (rather than abnormal parent behavior alone). Numerous factors that impinge on the distinction between these acts were considered, such as the child's age, the frequency, and severity of behavior shown by caregivers, cultural norms, and parental beliefs and goals in childrearing.

**Results:** The literature on child emotional maltreatment has advanced beyond the descriptive phase of scientific understanding, and principles and practical criteria for distinguishing such behavior from poor parenting are presented.

**Conclusions:** Recommendations focus on practical guidelines for assessing risk and activating appropriate prevention and intervention: (1) parental actions and relative risk of harm to the child are *both* important ingredients in defining and distinguishing child emotional maltreatment from other forms of poor parenting; (2) poor parenting methods fall along a broad continuum and fit within a population health mandate aimed at reducing incidence of all forms of negative parenting methods; (3) child emotional maltreatment can be defined categorically based on qualitatively more extreme and potentially more harmful behaviors (than poor parenting), which requires a focused intervention response. Additional recommendations for training, research, and community-based public health initiatives are presented.

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Child abuse reporting laws have been in place throughout many countries since the 1960s. However, these laws tend to be relatively general and do not provide specific operationalized definitions to determine the threshold between non-abusive but problematic parenting and an incident of maltreatment that could endanger a child. As a result, investigations for child maltreatment in general, and emotional maltreatment in particular, lack clear guidelines and are subject to considerable discretion and interpretation (Heyman & Slep, 2006).

An overarching theme emerged from a panel of experts during a recent policy think tank in Ottawa, Ontario concerning difficulty defining or classifying child emotional maltreatment [Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC, 2009)]. Whereas all

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participants agreed that emotional maltreatment in early childhood is not getting the attention it deserves as a public health issue, the issue of clarifying what is and is not (or should and should not be) included under the emotional maltreatment label arose time and again. There was consensus that such a definition is critical because it determines how the issue is perceived and addressed. On the one hand, labeling a parental act as “maltreatment” garners more attention and resources; on the other hand, including too many acts under the label “maltreatment” leads to confusion and inconsistent action, especially when the concerns may be better described as poor or dysfunctional parenting. For example, labeling an act as maltreatment automatically implies a child welfare response, although the child and family might be better served through public health interventions. Among other related issues, there was strong consensus from the panel that the field needs to distinguish between emotional maltreatment and poor/dysfunctional parenting.

In this paper we seek to make a distinction between poor parenting methods and emotionally abusive and neglectful methods based on the scientific and professional literature. We summarize the extant literature on healthy parenting methods or styles, and contrast this with the known literature on poor parenting methods and their impact on child development. Similarly, we summarize the common definitions of child emotional maltreatment and child outcomes, with an emphasis on identifying the contextual and relational aspects of such behavior that are the substrates of emotional harm to the child. The last section of the paper posits two strategies for examining distinctions between poor/dysfunctional versus emotionally maltreating parenting.

### Positive versus negative childrearing methods

Essential to the formation of close relationships across development is the ability to understand and adhere to the rules and roadmaps that govern interpersonal interactions. Parents provide this critical socialization function to their children and are responsible for teaching them formative lessons about the socioemotional and behavioral conventions that are appropriate within their particular cultural context. This type of knowledge is often transferred quite explicitly by parents in terms of the limits they set for their children, as well as the manner in which they enforce them.

Developmentally appropriate boundaries help children to structure and make sense of their inner worlds, scaffolding their ability to identify and manage difficult feelings like frustration and irritation, especially when their will is blocked and they are expected to compromise with another toward a shared goal. Emotion regulation is the foundation of all successful conflict resolution as it facilitates active listening, as well as the calm expression of one's own point of view (Calkins & Marcovitch, 2010). Children who have been socialized in this manner typically make pleasant and thoughtful playmates and students, and their future close friends and romantic partners are benefitted by their ability to maintain positive connections in the face of normative disagreements and feelings of stress.

The provision of love and limits are the key ingredients of positive childrearing methods. Child development experts formally call these dimensions *responsiveness* and *demandingness/control* (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). Responsiveness refers to the level of acceptance and sensitivity that the parent expresses to the child, whereas demandingness/control refers to the clarity of expectations that the parent has for the child's behavior, as well as the supervisory and disciplinary strategies utilized to achieve these ends. Both elements must be present in order to maximize the positive developmental outcomes of the child.

The *authoritative* approach to childrearing is the optimum relationship style because it balances the dimensions of responsive and demandingness/control. Authoritative parents are characterized by the provision of ongoing warmth and support, especially during times of uncertainty and stress, and yet their emotional care is not devoid of the application of helpful guidelines, limits, and the structuring of a predictable routine. Authoritative parents do use disciplinary measures, but these tend to be moderate in nature, proportionate to the offense, and delivered calmly and with an eye toward restorative justice and the modeling of relationship repair. When appropriate, authoritative parents provide their children with a rationale as to why their behaviors were inappropriate. In this manner, they facilitate the internalization of social norms and moral codes so that their children can eventually socialize themselves in this regard, much as they will be required to do as adult members of society (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006).

Although authoritative parents are characterized by the *consistent* way in which they balance the two dimensions of parenting, it is important to note that they vary in the application of these elements as their child changes and develops. During the first two years of life, research suggests that the responsiveness dimension is critical (Sroufe, 2005). Caregivers must attune themselves to the physiological and safety needs of their infants. Correct reading of their child's signals is especially important in this regard as the provision of sensitive care hinges first upon the specificity and appropriateness of the support offered. As episodes of successful signaling and care accumulate, the infant comes to trust the parent and to anticipate ongoing need fulfillment in the infant-parent relationship. This process underlies the formation of a secure emotional attachment, the critical milestone of this developmental period. In addition, an emerging line of evidence suggests that the child's current care environment is just as important as parental consistency, if not more so. A positive, nurturing childcare environment contributes positively to children's socioemotional development, especially for individuals who may be genetically more reactive to environmental change (Belsky & Pasco-Fearon, 2009; Belsky & Pluess, 2009).

Even though children may have been exposed to positive parenting at a young age, this does not *immunize* them from the effects of inappropriate responsiveness or demandingness/control at later points in their development. Circumstances may change in the family, including divorce, loss, trauma, or economic downfall, which may alter the availability of the parent

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