

More than Words

The Emotional Maltreatment of Children



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KEYWORDS

- Emotional maltreatment • Child abuse • Child maltreatment • Psychological abuse
- Domestic violence • Emotional abuse

KEY POINTS

- Children who experience emotional maltreatment in the first few years of life seem to be at the greatest risk of suffering the most negative and damaging outcomes.
- Emotional maltreatment can cause permanent damage to a child's developing brain and often leads to a wide range of damaging social, cognitive, and behavioral symptoms.
- Medical professionals can identify children at risk of emotional maltreatment by noting difficult or inappropriate caregiver-child interactions, paying attention to the facial expressions and language used by the caregiver when describing his or her child, and by being aware of specific risk factors for emotional maltreatment that may be present in the family's social history.
- A wide range of factors, including domestic violence, caregiver mental health concerns, and caregiver history of abuse put a child at an increased risk of being emotionally maltreated.
- Prevention/intervention techniques must focus on improving life circumstances of the child and caregivers.

INTRODUCTION

Emotional maltreatment, although often overlooked and underappreciated, may be the most complex, prevalent, and damaging form of child abuse or neglect. Difficulties in understanding and defining emotional maltreatment have resulted, in part, from varying terminology used to refer to this form of maltreatment over the last 30 years: psychological abuse, emotional abuse, psychological maltreatment, and emotional neglect are terms that have been used interchangeably but inconsistently. The purpose of this article is to focus on what is known about emotional maltreatment.

Disclosures: None.

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Emotional maltreatment likely affects, either directly or indirectly, a large portion of the population, and its victims often suffer from a constellation of damaging cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms. If these symptoms remain untreated, childhood victims of emotional maltreatment become adults with a wide range of behavioral and emotional difficulties that often put their own children at risk of emotional maltreatment. Medical professionals are in a unique position to identify children who may be at risk of emotional maltreatment and direct the child and his or her family to community programs and social service providers that can work to improve the quality of life for the family.

WHAT IS EMOTIONAL MALTREATMENT?

Emotional maltreatment may include a single traumatic event or a repeated pattern of behavior that harms a child’s emotional, developmental, or psychological well-being.¹ It includes acts of omission or commission and can be verbal or nonverbal, active or passive, and perpetrated with or without actual intent to harm the child. This harm can be manifested as emotional distress or maladaptive behavior in the child resulting from the impact on cognitive, social, emotional or physical development. Emotional maltreatment (encompassing both emotional abuse and emotional neglect) requires no physical contact and occurs within the interactions between the perpetrator and child. These negative interactions characterize the relationship² and may leave the child feeling deficient, unimportant, or unloved.³

Emotional maltreatment can take several forms, including spurning; terrorizing; exploiting/corrupting; denying emotional responsiveness; isolating; and mental health, medical, and educational neglect (**Fig. 1**)—all negative and potentially degrading

Spurning	•Belittling, demeaning, ridiculing for showing normal emotions, or singling out/humiliating in public
Terrorizing	•Placing in unpredictable or chaotic circumstances, having rigid/unrealistic expectations accompanied by threats if not met, or threatening violence against child, child’s loved ones or objects
Exploiting/Corrupting	•Modeling, permitting, or encouraging antisocial or developmentally inappropriate behavior
Denying Emotional Responsiveness	•Being detached or uninvolved, providing little or no warmth, lack of nurturing or praise during any developmental period in childhood
Isolating	•Confining within environment, restricting social interactions, or failing to provide socialization and learning
Mental Health/Medical/Educ. Neglect	•Limiting a child’s access to necessary health care for reasons other than inadequate resources or refusing to provide for serious emotional/behavioral, physical health, or educational needs

Fig. 1. Forms of emotional maltreatment. (Data from Hart SN, Brassard MR, Binggeli NJ, et al. Psychological maltreatment. In: Myers JE, Berliner L, Briere J, editors. The APSAC handbook on child maltreatment. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage Publications; 2002. p. 79–104.)

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