



# Gender differences in the association between emotional maltreatment with mental, emotional, and behavioral problems in Swedish adolescents



Johan Melander Hagborg\*, Inga Tidefors, Claudia Fahlke

Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, Box 500, 40530 Gothenburg, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

Emotional maltreatment is a common form of child abuse with a powerful negative impact on mental health. The aim of this study was to examine the effect of emotional maltreatment on mental health and mental well-being in a general population of Swedish 12- to 13-year old girls and boys. Data was collected via self-report questionnaires in classroom settings from 1134 students. Emotional maltreatment had significant effects on mental health and mental well-being for both girls and boys. Moreover, there were significant interaction effects between gender and levels of emotional maltreatment. Girls reported decreased mental health and mental well-being at lower degrees of emotional maltreatment compared to boys. Furthermore, girls reported larger decreases in mental health in response to exposure of emotional maltreatment. For internalizing symptoms, mental well-being and psychosomatic symptoms, exposure level of emotional maltreatment seemed to magnify the gender differences. For externalizing symptoms, there were no differences between girls and boys in the group reporting no emotional maltreatment and the increase in externalizing symptoms were of equal magnitude for both genders. Given the impact of emotional maltreatment on mental health in the general population, results from this study implies that a trauma-informed perspective is necessary in understanding gender differences in mental health in early adolescence. Further research is needed in order to understand the underlying processes generating the differences in girls and boys responses to emotional maltreatment.

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## 1. Introduction

Emotional maltreatment may be the most widespread form of child abuse (Hibbard, Barlow, & Macmillan, 2012). According to American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, 1995, p. 2), emotional maltreatment is defined as “A repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or only of value in meeting another’s needs”. Results from a growing body of research show that emotional maltreatment has a profound negative impact on the child’s and adolescent’s behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social development (Gilbert et al., 2009; Maguire et al., 2015). The impairment caused by emotional maltreatment

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [johan.hagborg@psy.gu.se](mailto:johan.hagborg@psy.gu.se), [johan.melander.hagborg@gmail.com](mailto:johan.melander.hagborg@gmail.com) (J.M. Hagborg), [inga.tidefors@psy.gu.se](mailto:inga.tidefors@psy.gu.se) (I. Tidefors), [claudia.fahlke@psy.gu.se](mailto:claudia.fahlke@psy.gu.se) (C. Fahlke).

on the child's development has been shown to be in par with the detrimental impact of both sexual and physical abuse and the consequences are manifested across the lifespan (Festinger & Baker, 2010; Hart et al., 1998; Spinazzola et al., 2014; Taillieu et al., 2016; Wolfe & McGee, 1994).

Despite the knowledge about the emotional maltreatment's detrimental impact and common occurrence, many aspects of emotional maltreatment continues to be under-studied (Egeland, 2009). For example, in many studies emotional maltreatment have been measured as a single construct and the differentiated impact of both emotional neglect (acts of omission) and emotional abuse (acts of commission) on mental health has been under-researched (Allen, 2008; Shaffer, Yates, & Egeland, 2009; Taillieu et al., 2016). However, in a recent study on young adults, differences in subsequent mental health outcomes of emotional neglect and emotional abuse were found (Taillieu et al., 2016). Hence, it is important to study samples of early adolescents in order to evaluate the relationship between emotional maltreatment and psychosocial impairment found in older samples (Shaffer et al., 2009; Taillieu et al., 2016). Furthermore, in early adolescence, girls start to report higher levels of depression and anxiety than boys. This difference emerges in adolescence but is then stable over the lifespan (e.g. Currie et al., 2012; Ge et al., 2001; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994). Therefore, it is vital to study the gender-specific impact of emotional maltreatment on a wide array of mental health outcomes in this specific age (Cullerton-Sen et al., 2008). Last, there is a lack of studies where the relationships between maltreatment-severity and subsequent mental health outcomes are analyzed.

### 1.1. Emotional maltreatment and internalizing symptoms

Results from several studies confirm the impact that emotional maltreatment has on the degree of internalizing symptoms in adolescence (Courtney, Kushwaha, & Johnson, 2008; Shapero et al., 2014; Spinazzola et al., 2014). Some studies have shown that the effects of both emotional neglect (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Smailes, 1999) and emotional abuse (Hamilton et al., 2013) on internalizing symptoms surpasses that of physical maltreatment. However, it is not clear, if trauma and maltreatment affect internalizing symptoms differently in adolescent girls and boys and studies show different results. There are indications, however, of gender differences in etiology (i.e. girls and boys internalizing symptoms are caused by different sub-types of EM) as well as vulnerability (i.e. girls reacting to EM with significantly larger increases in internalizing symptoms than boys (Ge, Conger, & Elder, 2001; Paul & Eckenrode, 2015)). For example, McGee et al. (1997) have shown that when physical abuse-severity was rated as low, girls and boys did not differ in degree of symptoms. However, with increases in abuse severity, girls internalizing symptoms increased more compared to boys. Contrarily, Chirichella-Besemer (2005) found no significant differences in levels of internalizing symptoms between adult women and men with experiences of emotional maltreatment.

### 1.2. Emotional maltreatment and externalizing symptoms

Most studies on the relationship between emotional maltreatment and externalizing symptoms have focused on the effects of emotional abuse. However, studies that include younger children indicate a differentiated impact of emotional abuse and emotional neglect. For example, Egeland, Sroufe, and Erickson (1983) found that emotional abuse predominantly affected anger and hyperactivity while emotional neglect affected self-esteem in preschoolers. In a study on young adults, Taillieu et al. (2016) found that emotional abuse was associated with a broad outcome of mental health problems while emotional neglect primarily was associated with social withdrawal and interpersonal problems. In the study by Taillieu et al. (2016), however, externalizing symptoms were not included. In a study on imprisoned adolescents it was found that emotional abuse positively correlated with externalizing but not internalizing symptoms and no gender-differences were found (Silva, Graña, & González-Cieza, 2014). In another study on physically abused adolescents, it was found that emotional abuse moderated the relationship between physical abuse and externalizing symptoms (Butaney, Pelcovitz, & Kaplan, 2011). In one of the few studies investigating the prevalence and impact of emotional maltreatment on mental health in adolescent community samples, it was found that emotional maltreatment made unique, significant contributions to the development of both emotional and behavioral problems (Arslan, 2015). Examining gender-differences concerning externalizing symptoms as an effect of emotional maltreatment in clinical samples of children and adolescents, both Crittenden, Claussen, and Sugarman (1994) and Spinazzola et al. (2014) found a higher degree of externalizing symptoms as an effect of emotional maltreatment for boys compared to girls.

### 1.3. Psychosomatic symptoms

Stomach ache, headache and sleeplessness are common in adolescence (Knishkowsky, Palti, Tima, Adler, & Gofin, 1995) and, in general, more common among girls compared to boys (Berntsson & Gustafsson, 2000). A number of potentially traumatic experiences such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, natural disasters and sexual abuse have been linked to higher degrees of psychosomatic symptoms (Bonvanie, van Gils, Janssens, & Rosmalen, 2015; Jernbro, Svensson, Tindberg, & Janson, 2012; Masuda et al., 2007; Sun et al., 2014). Although findings are somewhat inconsistent, most studies report a stronger relationship between traumatic experiences and psychosomatic problems in females compared to males (Afarri et al., 2014).

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