



Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect

Australian Childhood Foundation

**Emotional abuse of children:
A study of the narratives in
protective assessment and
intervention**

Joe Tucci and Chris Goddard

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Definitions of emotional abuse

Garbarino, Guttman and Seely (1986)

“...Psychological maltreatment is a concerted attack by an adult on a child’s development of self and social competence, a pattern of psychically destructive behaviour...”

Definitions of emotional abuse

Garbarino, Guttman and Seely (1986)

- **Rejecting:** Behaviours which communicate or constitute abandonment of the child, such as refusal to show affection.
- **Isolating:** Preventing the child from participating in normal opportunities for social interaction.
- **Terrorising:** Threatening the child with severe or sinister punishment, or deliberately developing a climate of fear or threat.
- **Ignoring:** The caregiver is psychologically unavailable to the child and fails to respond to the child's behaviour.
- **Corrupting:** Caregiver behaviour which encourages the child to develop false social values that reinforce antisocial or deviant behavioural patterns, such as aggression, criminal acts or substance abuse.

Developmental considerations in understanding emotional abuse



Type	Infancy	Early Childhood	School Age	Adolescence
Rejecting	Refusing to return baby's smiles	Placing the child away from home	Telling the child he/she does not belong in family	Expelling the young person from family
Terrorising	Extreme and unpredictable responses to baby's behaviour	Using magical threats to punish the child	Using fear as only form of discipline	Threatening to humiliate young person in front of peers
Ignoring	Not noticing and responding to baby's attachment	Leaving the child with disengaged caregivers	Not protecting child from assaults from Siblings	Lack of interest in young person's activities
Isolating	Leaving the child alone	Punishing the child for being sociable with other children	Preventing child from socialising with peer group	Prohibiting young person from engaging in other school activities
Corrupting	Involving the baby in gratifying behaviour for adult	Rewarding the child for aggressive behaviour	Encouraging child to steal	Encouraging the young person to use drugs/alcohol

Definitions of emotional abuse

Hart, Germain and Brassard (1987)

- “...Psychological maltreatment of children and youth consists of acts of omission and commission which are judged on the basis of a combination of community standards and professional expertise to be psychologically damaging.
- Such acts are committed by individuals, singly or collectively, who by their characteristics (eg., age, status, knowledge, organisational form) are in a position of power that renders a child vulnerable.
- Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioural, affective, or physical functioning of the child...”

Definitions of emotional abuse

O'Hagan (1993)

Emotional abuse is

“...the sustained, repetitive, inappropriate emotional response to the child’s expression of emotion and its accompanying expressive behaviour...”

Psychological abuse is

“...the sustained, repetitive, inappropriate behaviour which damages, or substantially reduces, the creative and developmental potential of crucially important mental faculties and mental processes of a child: these include intelligence, memory, recognition, perception, attention, language and moral development...”

Emotional domain of children

Emotion expressed or experienced by child	Examples of appropriate caregiver response	Examples of emotionally abusive caregiver response
<p>Interest</p> <p>Joy and laughter</p> <p>Distress</p> <p>Anger</p> <p>Fear</p>	<p>Interest/curiosity, praise, encouragement</p> <p>Joy, pride, laughter, enthusiasm in sharing</p> <p>Comforting</p> <p>Disapproval, disappointment, reassurance</p> <p>Comforting, explaining, familiarising</p>	<p>Disinterest, annoyance, anger, removal of source of interest</p> <p>Indifference, annoyance, anger, threats</p> <p>Ignoring, rejection, indifference, mocking</p> <p>Greater anger, submission, threat of violence</p> <p>Anger, irritation, mockery, isolating, threatening</p>

Psychological domain of children



- **Comprehension:** Take in and recognise information
- **Understanding:** Adapt new information to previous schema of experience and knowledge
- **Reasoning:** Apply sequencing to thinking process and realise outcome
- **Memory:** Identify previous experiences and knowledge, registration, storage and retrieval of information and sensory data

Psychological domain of children



- **Perception:** Interpretative process of assembling sensations and experiences into a mental representation of the world
- **Language:** System of communication, transmission and understanding of infinite messages
- **Attention:** Focus of energy to select relevant information and experience
- **Insight:** Ability to use new experiences to reflect on reactions, behaviour and attitudes

Methodology

- A total of 62 interviews were completed.
- Discussed 22 cases
- All were identified by child protection services as having the primary abuse type substantiated as emotional abuse
- The participants comprised of children and young people (23%), parents and extended family members (11%), carers (20%), child protection workers and managers (31%), and community child welfare professionals (15%).

Snapshot of initial results

We use the same term to mean very different things

- Abandonment 8 descriptive constructs
- Rejection 9 descriptive constructs
- Parentification 4 descriptive constructs
- Verbal abuse 6 descriptive constructs
- Inconsistent care 7 descriptive constructs

Abandonment – Protective Worker A



“...There was another incident of, I suppose it would be termed abandonment. I'd been out and I'd spoken to them about strategies in sort of dealing with Adrian and I talked about the time out concept and George had said to me, yes but I tell him to go to his room and he won't go, and I said well, you know, why don't you remove yourself, you know, go and sit in the loo and read a book for 5 minutes, remove the power base, just for 5 minutes, go away. So then we got news that they'd taken Adrian to the video shop, which is a couple of kilometers away, and he stacked on a turn

Abandonment – Protective Worker A



because he didn't get his way, so they actually got in the car and drove home to have a cup of coffee and left him there, and then, they were going to go back and get him anyway, but that was the way they handled it and when I sort of tackled them about it, and they said, but you told us to use time out, retreat and I'm saying, well yes, but, you know, like into the next room, not abandon him, he felt abandoned...Again their response was he knows the way home, he knew how to get there...and

Abandonment – Protective Worker A



I was trying to say perhaps even if you had said to him, well we need to get away from this until you calm down and then go to sit in the car so that he knows that you're there. But they just couldn't see that, it was just, well you told us to have time out and he knew where we lived and he knew the man in the video shop..."

Abandonment – Protective Worker B



“...I think one of the significant reasons for Kerryn needing therapy was – a very strong memory of being left in a car, abandoned by mum, and a lot of anxiety and confusion and fear arising from that, also the mother finding it difficult to accept the intervention and court decisions and would go to the grandmother’s home and beat on the door and create a scene and the child was very fearful of being taken away and maybe she would probably –

Abandonment – Protective Worker B



“...I think it is possible the police might have been called –so she may well have been fearful of what the mother had to go through as well...and also just the mother’s inability to provide that emotional security, or be available for the child....”

Abandonment – Protective Worker B



“...I think it is possible the police might have been called –so she may well have been fearful of what the mother had to go through as well...and also just the mother’s inability to provide that emotional security, or be available for the child....”

Deconstructing Abandonment

Renunciation

- The act of parents relinquishing the care of their child to the state.
- It is not accompanied by rejection of a specific child but reflects external conditions which prevent parents maintaining guardianship and custody.
- It is permanent in nature. It is imperative that an assessment of the parents' motivation for relinquishing care is elicited.
- Case plans can include long term placement planning and substitute relationship development.

Deconstructing Abandonment

Emotional and psychological withdrawal

- The act of parents disengaging from their relationship with their child and retracting affirmation, support and care from all interactions with the child.
- The child is left emotionally and psychologically alone, despite a relationship with the parent continuing at some level.
- For the child, this environment is confusing, undermining and uncertain.
- Intervention should aim to clarify, stabilise and limit the child's exposure to their parents.

Deconstructing Abandonment

Desertion

- The act by parents of temporarily leaving a child to protect and care for him/herself.
- This act is often accompanied by a misunderstanding of children's capacities and developmental vulnerabilities.
- Parental motivation includes modelling survival to children, attraction to an activity with higher short term rewards, reacting to conditions without considering the impact on the child.
- Statutory intervention is required to change relationship patterns and to underscore the significance of the possible impact on the child.

Deconstructing Abandonment

Spurning

- The act by parents of communicating unequivocal rejection of a child.
- This is the total abdication of responsibility to care for a child stemming from a dislike, aversion or antipathy of qualities or characteristics specific to a particular child.
- Intervention should move as quickly as possible to permanency planning and the limitation of contact between child and parents.

Deconstructing Abandonment



Relationship forfeiture

- The act by parents of sacrificing their relationship with a child for gain in another relationship area.
- This includes the disavowal of a child emotionally and practically in order for the parent to
 - maintain a relationship with a partner who does not engage with the child;
 - promote the survival of another sibling;
 - alleviate a personal crisis associated with their identity;
 - continue to satisfy an addiction;
 - divest themselves of painful emotional connections with their history, child and/ or family.

Deconstructing Abandonment



Relationship forfeiture (cont)

- Intervention should focus on providing therapeutic response to address the substantive background factors supporting the relationship climate between child and parent.
- There should be early recognition of the extent to which the relationship can be salvaged

Verbal abuse - Josh

Josh: Yeah and police told me to go home as soon as possible. So I went home, wasn't looking forward to it, soon as I opened the door dad started yelling at me, calling me "woosy" things like that.

Interviewer: How come? Why was he calling you those sorts of names?

Josh: Because I ran off from him.

Interviewer: And did he want you to stay and fight or something?

Josh: Yeah most probably, my dad's an arsehole. Someone told me that it's verbal abuse.

Verbal abuse – Caseworker A

”...they will tell him that he is not wanted there, because with regard to the stealing of the money from the wallet there was apparently a big fight and both Trevor and Diane were yelling at Christopher, accusing him of stealing and being a liar for saying that he didn't steal and they basically told him that they are not going to have kids like him in their house and that he is bad and that he can go home and they don't want to see him and they don't want to talk to him, and that's it, he's not welcome in their home.

Verbal abuse – Case worker A



So, they do tell him, they tell him in no uncertain words how much they don't want him, but the time when they do, or if they do make contact they don't really tell him that they do want him either, you see. It's repeated verbal abuse...”

Deconstructing Verbal Abuse

Denigration

- The parental act of communicating to a child that he/she holds no value or worth.
- It is accomplished by parents engaging in critical and negative commentary about qualities and/or capacities of the child. Its ambition is to cause a child to experience humiliation, embarrassment, and shame.
- However, the explicit aims by parents may be to invoke remorse and regret in the child for misbehaviour.
- In combination with conflict between child and parent, it is a powerful means of reinforcing hostility and animosity from parent to child.

Deconstructing Verbal Abuse

Oppressive reinforcement

- The use by parents of strategies (verbal and physical) which reinforce their control over the child.
- It invokes fear and subordination to the parent's belief and value system.
- It aims to minimise children's experience of choice and opportunity to shape decisions which affect them.

Deconstructing Verbal Abuse

Vilification

- The act of communicating to a child that an identity or identities with which he/she has affiliated are invalid and deficient.
- Its ambition is to induce stigma and cast aspiration on the character, motivation and qualities of the child.
- It can unsettle children from engaging in other supportive peer-like relationships, effectively increasing the child's experience of isolation and dependence on the parent for affirmation.

Deconstructing Verbal Abuse

Threatening contact

- Communication by parents aimed at undermining and weakening the confidence and sense of stability experienced by a child within the set of family relationships.
- Parents use the possibility of extreme negative repercussions in order to achieve an impact on the child in the present.

Deconstructing rejection

Maligning

- The act by parents to repeatedly over time engage in feedback to a child which highlights and reinforces the parents' perception that the child is at fault for causing difficulties experienced by an individual parent or by the whole family.
- One of its ambitions is to transfer responsibility for the emergence of problems from parents to children.
- Maligning is experienced by children as dislike or animosity from parents. It serves to reinforce the features of a child's identity which are singled out by parents as destructive, malevolent and oppositional.

Deconstructing rejection

Repudiation

- The act by parents of disowning their child.
- The parents engage in behaviour which communicates publicly their refusal to recognise their responsibility for the child's care or protection.
- In this interaction, a child will be left without a guardian/carer should a third party not intervene.

Deconstructing rejection

Denial of right to belong

- The act by parents which undermines the child's experience of support from individuals, families or peers to the extent to which the child no longer believes that they have the right to seek out such groupings for support, guidance or comfort.
- In this scenario, the child is actively sequestered from social connection and is unable to engage in ways which will encourage the development of relationships.

Deconstructing inconsistent care



Exposure to multiple caregiver relationships

- Actions by parents which result in a child being care for by an inordinate number of individuals with no real investment in a relationship to that child or the parent.
- In and of itself, such exposure constitutes abuse because it reflects parent's failure to recognise or unwillingness to appreciate the emotional and psychological consequences for children

Deconstructing inconsistent care



Transitory care

- Parental failure to maintain a regular and ongoing relationship with their child.
- In this sense, parents have an expectation that they are able to engage and disengage contact with their child without any significant detrimental consequence to the child's development.
- The impact on the child is accommodation and ultimate suppression of their own interest or need in experiencing the affection of their parent.

Deconstructing inconsistent care

Contingent parenting

- Parental acts which communicate that their commitment to engage in a relationship with their child is contingent on
 - the child's appropriate behaviour,
 - conducive circumstances in the parent's life,
 - the parent's own motivation at any given time,
 - the parent's perception of whether or not the relationship is fulfilling to them,
 - the child's support for the parent's terms of the relationship, including its conditional nature.
- Engagement is a deliberate choice made by the parent. The child is left confused about how to re-engage their parent when they have disengaged.

Deconstructing inconsistent care



Illusionary affirmation

- Acts by parents which serve to undermine the affirmation and support received by children in their interaction with their parents.
- Without observable cause or justification, parents vary between communicating affection for the child and a lack of commitment to the child.

Deconstructing parentification

Endangerment

- Acts by parents which expose children to an imminent possibility of violence directed against them.
- Child parentification should not be used in the circumstances where children are forced into a role of protecting other family members from possible violence.
- In this contest, parentification should be considered an outcome at best. At worst, its application shifts responsibility away from the impact of the violence onto the child's behaviour.

Deconstructing parentification



Endangerment (cont)

- Consistent exposure to violence for children acts as a powerful reinforcement for ways of relating with the perpetrator of violence which attempt to reduce the further escalation of the violence.
- Parentification is consistent with this experience for children. The focus of statutory intervention should remain the endangerment of the child by the parents.

Deconstructing parentification



Role contamination

- Parental acts which support the transferral of parental responsibility to the child.
- Along with the role reversal described as parentification, the message is communicated that the child is unlikely to succeed in this role. They are set up to fail and to experience failure by the parent.
- This enables the parent to justify attempts to re-assert their authority in the parenting relationship.
- The resistance to change by the child stems from confusion imposed by the parent's withdrawal of endorsement for the child's role.

Conclusion

- Definitions of emotional abuse are important
- However, they are only as good as the library of ideas we can access in operationalising these definitions
- We need greater diversity in the constructs we use in identifying and describing emotional abuse
- Decision-making about cases of emotional abuse are imbued with the same limitations that stem from a poor vocabulary surrounding emotional abuse.



Feedback



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