

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

Office of Human Development Services  
Administration for Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau  
National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect



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# Perspectives on Child Maltreatment in the Mid '80s

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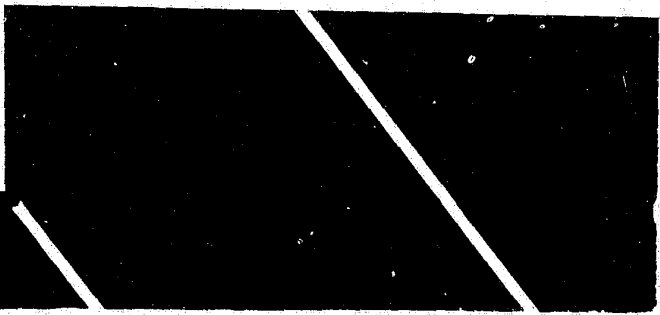
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# Emotional Abuse of Children

by Dorothea Dean

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**T**he manner in which the emotional needs of children are met may be the single most significant factor in determining their attitudes, adjustment and performance.

A child's life may be impacted by emotional neglect, emotional assault or emotional abuse. While all these situations may be abusive, not all such cases could be successfully taken to court to protect the child.

*Emotional neglect* is an act of omission, frequently the result of parental ignorance or indifference. As a result, the child is not given positive emotional support and stimulation. Parents may give adequate physical care to their child but leave him or her alone in a crib for long periods of time, seldom cuddle or talk to the child or fail to give him or her encouragement and recognition.

A child needs positive interactions, stimulation, security and a feeling of belonging and self-worth which only a concerned parent or caretaker can provide. These emotional needs are continuous throughout childhood and a child whose needs are not met is at a disadvantage and handicapped in the perception of self and in interactions with others.

*Emotional assault* is an attack on a child inflicted by a parent or another adult or child. It may be a single incident or part of a continuing pattern. Most often it is a verbal assault—critical, demeaning and emotionally devastating. The child feels attacked, vulnerable and, frequently as he or she grows older, defensive. This may lead to counterattacks which often escalate into estrangement and alienation of parent and child. A single, or infrequent, verbal assault is not sufficient to be considered emotional abuse, although the incident itself may be abusive.

In the extremes, both emotional neglect and emotional assault may become emotional abuse and subject to court action.

*Emotional abuse* is the most difficult type of abuse to define and diagnose. Physical abuse, and some sexual

abuse, involves tangible or observable evidence which can be documented and verified. The victim, if old enough, can describe what occurred. Emotional abuse, however, is intangible. The wounds are internal but they may be more devastating and crippling than any other form of abuse. Emotional abuse also differs from other types of abuse in that the victim may not realize he is being abused and the abuser may not recognize his abusive behavior.

Many reporting laws now incorporate designations of "emotional abuse" or "mental suffering" but fail to define what they mean. Since there is a dearth of case law on emotional abuse, professionals are left in a quandary as to what does constitute emotional abuse and how such reports are viewed by the courts.

There are no consistent, accepted legal criteria for the determination of emotional abuse; the legal interpretation may vary from court to court. Some courts may refuse to recognize even the concept of emotional abuse. Consequently, few cases appear before the courts because of the difficulty in establishing both the emotional abuse and the need for legal intervention. Behavioral sciences may recognize and accept situations as emotional neglect or abuse which would not be upheld in a court of law. The entire area of emotional abuse requires difficult judgments and most courts are hesitant to intercede unless the effects of the emotional abuse are both extreme and readily apparent.

In this article, emotional abuse can be defined as a chronic attitude or act on the part of a parent or caretaker that is detrimental to, or prevents the development of, a positive self-image in the child. This is an extremely broad definition and it should be emphasized that consideration of parents' attitudes or actions should not be limited to isolated instances, which probably occur in all families. Emotional abuse involves a persistent, chronic pattern of behavior toward a child, which then becomes the dominant characteristic in the child's life.

The difficulty in recognizing and understanding emotional abuse, and the fact that many children themselves are unaware of being abused, results in many cases remaining unrecognized.

If a child is unaware of the abuse, and the parent is unaware that he or she is abusing, why should society concern itself?

Children who grow up under negative conditions, constantly being criticized, scapegoated and belittled, are not going to become competent adults capable of developing their full potential. They incorporate the image in which they have been cast by their parents and live with all the negative feelings they have developed as a result. They may develop character and behavior disorders, mental illness or, at best, become persons filled with self-doubt and internal anger. They view themselves as less desirable, less intelligent and less competent than their peers. Handicapped in establishing positive and effective relationships, they develop into adults who are less effective than they could be.

Three categories of emotional abuse have been presented successfully in the San Diego County Juvenile Court. They may be identified as those involving one or more of the following characteristics:

- An act that in itself is sufficient to establish abuse.
- Differential treatment of one child in the family.
- A reduction in the child's functioning that can be linked to abusive treatment.

In preparing a case for court, it is important to identify which of these characteristics or criteria are present and to document each one as extensively as possible. It is also necessary to show that the emotional abuse has had a detrimental effect upon the child.

### **Emotional abuse is the most difficult type of abuse to define and diagnose.**

The following cases of Patty, Mark and Sandra illustrate emotional abuse resulting from an act sufficient in itself to establish abuse.

When Patty misbehaved her parents identified the behavior and made her wear signs labelling it—"I am a liar" and "I hit my little sister," for example—wherever she went.

As punishment for his misbehavior, Mark was made to stand in the front yard clothed only in a diaper. What was embarrassing and shameful for a child became agonizing and humiliating in the extreme for an adolescent.

Discipline and punishment for both Mark and Patty involved public humiliation. The court found both children to be emotionally abused, based on a child's right to reasonable and just discipline in the privacy of the home. Subjecting a child to public scorn was not considered reasonable or positive discipline.

Sandra's situation was similar but with a major difference—the abuse was a one-time occurrence. Because

Sandra returned home late one evening, her parents shaved her head. The emotional trauma that resulted affected her school attendance, employment and relationships with others. Sandra would not voluntarily leave her house and when forced to go out she wore a stocking cap to conceal her baldness. The court deemed her punishment inappropriate, resulting in obvious long-term effects and continuing mental suffering.

A type of abuse which most frequently comes to the attention of the courts is that in which there is an observable difference in the way one child is treated compared to other children in the home. Cindy's case is such an example.

When Cindy was eight, she was referred by school authorities. Her teachers were concerned that Cindy was being treated differently at home than her brothers and sisters and felt that she needed protection from the negative attitude displayed toward her. Not only the parents but the other children in the family scapegoated Cindy.

The school staff described a "Cinderella syndrome." Cindy was the child in the family who always wore cast-off clothing, was required to do more household tasks than the other children and was not given the same privileges and opportunities. The other children were allowed to join Brownie troops and Boy Scouts but Cindy was not allowed to join or participate in any outside activities. The family ate in the dining room—except for Cindy, who ate in the kitchen standing at the drainboard. The mother never visited Cindy's classroom nor inquired about her progress.

The contrast between her treatment and that of the other children in the family was obvious, tangible and observable. The parents felt that Cindy was different from the other children, and that her treatment was due to her own inability to integrate well into the family. She was seen as a difficult child over whom rigid discipline and control had to be exercised.

Cindy had been characterized in this way throughout her developmental years. She viewed herself as less intelligent and less desirable than the other children. She was depressed and unhappy about her inability to participate with the family but felt she was bad and did not deserve to be included.

Cindy is typical of many children who, for one reason or another, are rejected by their parents and relegated to a position in the family which makes them unloved and unwanted, and succeeds in making them feel that there is a justifiable reason for the rejection. Like many other children in her position, Cindy did not fight back. She accepted her role without question, or without antagonism. She is one of the youngsters who can become the perpetual victims of society, one of those whose low self-

esteem permits them to be used and abused in an uncomplaining and compliant manner.

Paul is a child whose reduced functioning could be linked to emotional abuse. Paul had been placed in an adoptive home when he was three weeks old. His adoptive parents, a young, professional couple, had material advantages and an unquestionable desire to be parents. As Paul grew older, however, he failed to develop some characteristics that his parents found desirable. "Paul was a cute baby, but he isn't a cute child," his mother said. She felt he was less physically attractive than she had expected and she detested the freckles he had developed.

When Paul entered school he did not perform academically as well as the parents demanded or compete successfully in sports. His failure to be an outstanding student was upsetting to both parents, and his lack of accomplishment in sports was upsetting to the father. His parents, in many subtle ways, let Paul know that he was a disappointment to them. Paul got the message early in life that he had been adopted and given a home and, in return, was expected to perform at a standard which he was failing to achieve. Paul later said he felt "like an idiot son that had to be kept out of sight." He was also feeling guilty about failing to meet the needs of his parents.

### **There are no consistent, accepted legal criteria for the determination of emotional abuse . . .**

At 12, Paul was sent to a private military school and returned home only for holidays. Paul's worst rejection by his parents came when he was 14 and was waiting for them to pick him up for Christmas vacation. The students and most of the staff at his school were already gone when he was called into the office and told that his parents were enroute to Mexico City for the holidays. They had left without talking to him or explaining why they did not include him in their holiday trip. At that point he hated his parents for not loving him, his natural mother for giving him up, and himself for being incapable of holding the love of either.

Paul ran away at age 16 and was referred to court. The reduction of functioning he displayed was apparent and documented by the schools he had attended. Despite a good I.Q., he had tested progressively lower at ages 12 and 14 than he had at age seven. His school records showed lower grades, shorter attention span and acting out behavior after each incident of parental rejection. By documenting specific instances when emotional abuse had occurred and showing a chronic pattern of reduced functioning, Paul was accepted by the court as an

emotionally abused minor.

Although the parents of Cindy and of Paul may not have understood all the emotional implications of their behavior, they were aware that their actions were causing their child to be distressed, disappointed and isolated. Many times, however, emotional abuse is inflicted without the parents being aware of it or recognizing that they are causing emotional damage to their child. Troy's mother was such a parent.

Troy lived with his mother and elderly grandmother. Troy's unmarried mother had been unwilling to ask a man to accept her illegitimate child. The grandmother frequently told Troy that his father had seduced her daughter and then refused to marry her. Both mother and grandmother identified Troy with the father, to whom they made continuous negative references. Troy was given no recognition for his good behavior, but when he did something wrong he was compared to the father.

By the time Troy was 12 he had successfully incorporated a negative self-image. He considered himself to be lazy, unreliable, untrustworthy and bad. He also bore considerable guilt because of his identification with the father and he saw himself as the reason his mother could not marry. By age 12 he was a chronic runaway. He accepted an image of himself as of no value and believed that he would live out his life causing problems and trouble for other people. He felt his mother would be better off and happier if he were not in the home.

When Troy's mother was interviewed it was evident that she had never thought of Troy as an individual but only as an extension of his father. She loved her son, however, and willingly accepted counseling to reevaluate her relationship with Troy and learn to recognize his good qualities and help build a more positive self-image.

Paul and Troy were referred to court for running away, not for emotional abuse. Paul was made a dependent child on the evidence of emotional abuse. No legal action was taken on behalf of Troy and proving emotional abuse would have been difficult. The pattern was evident, but specific instances of abuse were not documented or linked to dysfunctional behavior.

Many children experience more than one characteristic of emotional abuse. Perhaps the most difficult of all to define, particularly before a court of law, is that in which parents have set such high standards for their children that they can never reach. As a result, the children experience a constant cycle of defeat and failure. The intentions of the parents may be both legitimate and positive but the results can be devastating. Many parents who set high standards and are strict with their children are not abusive. However, when the

standards become so unrealistic that a child can never attain them, and the parent is constantly critical of the child's failure, it becomes abuse.

**An agency should . . . be an active advocate for children and intervene before a child's reactive behavior becomes the issue.**

Parents can maintain high standards for their children yet give them positive feelings about themselves and their abilities. Even if children know they will never achieve the standards, they still feel good about themselves because they receive recognition for their achievements and know that they are loved and a source of pride to their parents.

Ricky's is a classic case, one in which the positive elements were missing. His hard-working, conscientious parents never demonstrated affection toward their children and drove Ricky in the same manner they drove themselves, requiring that he excel in everything. Ricky was the oldest and therefore expected to perform at maximum capability at all times. The demands on the younger children were not as extreme and their punishment for failure less severe. Ricky was an honor student and an Eagle Scout. He had little interest in football but played because it was important to his father. His parents' work ethic required that Ricky work hard and not involve himself in non-productive activities. Friendships were discouraged and when he was not at school he was at home. Family activities were done as a group and he was expected to participate.

Ricky was constantly criticized. Because his father had set impossibly high standards, Ricky was in the untenable position of never being able to satisfy him. No matter how successfully he was viewed by his friends, classmates and teachers, he was seen at home as a failure and a disappointment. Ricky was never allowed to air his feelings at home. The father's control was total and it was evident that Ricky had been indoctrinated and conditioned to the extent that he was unable to develop the normal escape mechanisms usually available to children in similar situations—running away, asserting himself or rejecting his father's standards. Instead, with each rebuttal by his father, he tried harder and continued to experience the cycle of defeat, frustration and rejection. The constant pressure began to be reflected in his performance. His grades slipped from A's to B's and C's, he began to lose weight, and his coach commented that he sometimes seemed disoriented and confused. Under increased pressures, he attempted suicide.

This is a tragic example of a situation in which a parent makes unrealistic demands on a child without con-

sidering their effects on him or her. Ricky's parents are similar to others who feed their children well, provide them with good physical surroundings in which to grow, give them appropriate clothing and the advantages that they can afford, and yet fail to nurture them in the most important way: by helping them to develop self-esteem and the knowledge that they are wanted, loved and appreciated. If anyone had suggested to Ricky's parents that they were emotionally abusive, they would probably have been shocked at the suggestion and insisted that all they wanted was to make certain that their son achieved his highest possible potential. Yet they were insensitive to the fact that his most basic need was not being met and neither parent recognized the impact of their behavior on Ricky's emotional health.

**Agencies should . . . help to establish a network of community services to provide counseling to families in which emotional abuse occurs.**

All of the children described here have one thing in common—low self-esteem, accompanied by feelings of guilt and an assumption that they are responsible for being unworthy of their parents' love.

Agencies responsible for the protection of children should take the initiative in developing an action plan if court intervention has not been a recourse in cases of emotional abuse. Such a plan might incorporate the following steps:

- Contact the Juvenile Court and establish agreement on definitions and guidelines for court referrals.
- Document the abuse and its negative impact on the child.
- Use expert witnesses such as psychiatrists and psychologists.
- Determine what other interventions have been attempted and what results were achieved.

Agencies should also:

- Educate both the public and those in the juvenile justice system to recognize and report emotional abuse.
- Be an active advocate for children and intervene before a child's reactive behavior becomes the issue.
- Help to establish a network of community services to provide counseling to families in which emotional abuse occurs.

Emotionally abused children can be protected. Many identified families are willing to accept counseling but if official action is necessary there should be no hesitation by the designated agency to initiate court action to protect a child.