

Child emotional abuse is an often misunderstood form of trauma that can cause damage to a child's developing brain, leading to long-term learning difficulties, problematic behaviors, and increased incidences of physical and mental health issues. The emotional abuse of children may be the most damaging form of maltreatment, affecting their emotional and physical health as well as their social and cognitive development. As a society, we have a collective responsibility to prevent child emotional abuse. To accomplish this, we must initiate and support services and policies that enhance children's development, health and safety and we must advocate for policies and programs to help meet the basic needs of children and families. We must also promote research, training, and public education to strengthen protective factors that buffer risk factors for emotional abuse while also directly addressing those risk factors.

Prevent Child Abuse America advocates for:

- **Raising public awareness of the seriousness and signs of child emotional abuse.**
Despite the growing awareness and acknowledgement of child emotional abuse as a societal problem, many Americans still do not fully grasp its nature and seriousness. Therefore, public awareness campaigns must be launched to both educate the public about the issue and to help people identify the role they can play in preventing child emotional abuse. It is important that such campaigns focus on our shared responsibility to help optimize children's development, health and safety, and to prevent their emotional abuse.
- **Making mental health services available to all citizens, and especially to all those affected by children's emotional abuse.**
Children who have been emotionally abused may face severe and long-term psychological consequences. Mental health services, especially if timely, can help ease some of these consequences. They also may help stop the intergenerational transmission of child emotional abuse. Mental health services to those engaging in abusive behavior can help them address stressors that often lead to emotional abuse, helping end such abuse.
- **Increasing research efforts to improve our understanding of child emotional abuse – its nature, extent, causes, and consequences, as well as what helps prevent it.**
Our current understanding of child emotional abuse is limited. A better understanding is essential to guide policy makers and practitioners develop policies and programs to tackle the emotional abuse of children.

Despite evidence indicating that child emotional abuse may have long-term and serious harm on children's development, health and safety, little attention has been paid to how to best protect children from child emotional abuse.¹

Programs and activities, such as home visiting programs and parent mutual support self-help groups, hold potential for preventing child emotional abuse.² These programs can offer education on child development and appropriate expectations of children of different developmental stages, instruction on effective and appropriate strategies for communicating with children, including non-violent disciplinary methods, and guidance on how to support and nurture children. Research is needed to evaluate such programs and approaches to learn what works and what does not in preventing emotional abuse.

Background

Definition of Child Emotional Abuse

The emotional abuse of children has been difficult to define, and state definitions vary considerably.^{3,4} The following behaviors, however, characterize what many agree constitutes forms of emotional abuse:⁵

- **Rejecting:** The caregiver refuses to acknowledge the child's worth and the legitimacy of the child's needs.
- **Isolating:** The adult cuts the child off from normal social experiences, prevents the child from forming friendships, and makes the child believe that he or she is alone in the world.
- **Terrorizing:** The adult creates a climate of fear, bullies and frightens the child, and makes the child believe that the world is capricious and hostile.
- **Ignoring:** The adult deprives the child of essential stimulation and responsiveness.
- **Corrupting:** The adult encourages the child to engage in destructive and antisocial behavior, reinforces deviance, and impairs a child's ability to behave in socially appropriate ways.
- **Verbally Assaulting:** The adult humiliates the child with repeated name-calling, harsh threats, and sarcasm that continually "beat down" the child's self-esteem.
- **Overpressuring:** The adult imposes extreme pressure upon the child to behave and achieve in ways that are far beyond the child's capabilities.

Some states also recognize excessively harsh discipline and exposure of children to family violence as child emotional abuse.⁶

Scope of Child Emotional Abuse

In 2008, approximately 55,196 children (7.3 percent of all substantiated cases of child maltreatment) were officially counted as victims of child emotional abuse.⁷ Given the difficulties defining the emotional abuse of children, we lack good ways to measure this problem. Its scope remains uncertain, although many sense that it is quite prevalent.

Nature of Child Emotional Abuse

There is no single cause of emotional abuse. Instead, there are usually multiple and interacting contributors - at the levels of the child, parent, family, community and society. Examples of contributors include a child with a disability, a parent struggling with depression or substance abuse, intimate partner violence, a father who is not involved in their child's life, a lack of community supports (eg, affordable child care), the burdens associated with poverty, and inadequate policies to support families and parents.^{8,9} These characteristics greatly contribute to the intractability of the problem. Combinations of such problems may impair a parent's ability to ensure his or her child's needs are adequately met.

It is apparent that other forms of maltreatment, physical and sexual abuse as well as neglect, may in different ways be emotionally abusive. Indeed, long after bruises have faded and fractures healed, the emotional scars may be long lasting.

Consequences of Child Emotional Abuse

The consequences of child emotional abuse can be devastating and long-lasting, and include: increased risk for a lifelong pattern of depression, estrangement, anxiety, low self-esteem, inappropriate or troubled relationships, or a lack of empathy.¹⁰ During their childhood, victims may experience a delay in their developmental progress. Research also indicates that emotional abuse may be a stronger predictor of psychological, emotional, and behavioral impairments and trauma than accompanying physical abuse.¹¹

It is clear that the consequences of child emotional abuse extend far beyond the affected children and

families. Enormous societal costs are involved. Prevent Child Abuse America estimated the economic impact of child abuse and neglect at \$104 billion in 2007; and this was likely a conservative estimate. Thus, in addition to the compelling human argument to help optimize children's development, health and safety, there is also a financial impetus to help prevent the neglect of children. The aphorism that "our children are our nation's most valuable resource" should be more than a slogan. Finally, at the heart of child neglect is a concern with their basic rights, their human rights.

The costs associated with the pervasive and long-lasting effects of child abuse and neglect are as undeniable as our obligation to prevent – not just respond to – this problem. In 2007, \$33 billion in direct costs for foster care services, hospitalization, mental health treatment, and law enforcement were supplemented by over \$70 billion in indirect costs like loss of individual productivity, chronic health problems, special education, and delinquent and criminal justice services.¹²

For more information contact Prevent Child Abuse America at 312-663-3520 or at mailbox@preventchildabuse.org.

Endnotes

¹ Glaser, D. (2002). Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): a conceptual framework. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 697-714.

² Dowell, K., Hughes, C., Leicht, C., Madigan, A., & Thomas, D., (2003). *Emerging practices in the prevention of child abuse and neglect*. Available online at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/programs/whatworks/report/emergingca.cfm>.

³ Glaser, D. (2002). Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): a conceptual framework. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 697-714.

⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2008). *State Statutes*. Available online at www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/.

⁵ Garbarino, J., Guttman, E., & Seeley, J.W. (1986). *The Psychologically Battered Child*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pearl, P. (1994). Emotional abuse. In A.E. Brodeur & J.A. Monteleone (Eds), *Child Maltreatment: A Clinical Guide and Reference*. St Louis: GW Medical Publishing

⁶ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2008). *State Statutes*. Available online at www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state/.

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2010). *Child Maltreatment 2008*. Available from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm08/cm08.pdf>.

⁸ Goldman, J., Salus, M. K., Wolcott, D., Kennedy, K. Y. (2003). *A Coordinated Response to Child Abuse and Neglect: The Foundation for Practice*. Washington, DC. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. Available from <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/foundation/foundation.pdf>.

⁹ DePanfilis, Diane (2006). *Child Neglect: A Guide for Prevention, Assessment and Intervention*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families.

¹⁰ Kairys, Steven W., Johnson, Charles F., Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect. (2002) *The Psychological Maltreatment of Children--Technical Report*. *Pediatrics* 2002 109: e68. Available online at: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/109/4/e68>.

¹¹ Glaser, D. (2002). Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): a conceptual framework. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 697-714.

¹² Wang, C.T. & Holton, J. (2008). *Total Estimated Cost of Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States*. Available online at http://member.preventchildabuse.org/site/DocServer/cost_analysis.pdf?docID=144.