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Child Abuse & Neglect



Emotional abuse in a sample of multiply maltreated, urban young adolescents: Issues of definition and identification

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The main purpose of this paper is to use the Brassard and Donovan [Brassard, M. R. & Donovan, K.L. (2006). Defining psychological maltreatment. In M. M. Freerick, J. F. Knutson, P. K. Trickett, & S. M. Flanzer (Eds.), *Child abuse and neglect: Definitions, classifications, and a framework for research* (pp. 151–197). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookers Publishing Co., Inc.] framework to examine and describe the nature of emotional abuse experienced by a sample of urban, ethnically diverse male and female youth ($N = 303$) identified as maltreated by a very large public child welfare agency.

Methods: Case record abstraction was conducted on the DCFS records of these maltreated youth using the Maltreatment Case Record Abstraction Instrument (MCRAI) which was based on the work of Barnett et al. [Barnett, D., Manly, J. T., & Cicchetti, D. (1993). Defining child maltreatment: The interface between policy and research. In D. Cicchetti & S. L. Toth (Eds.), *Advances in applied developmental psychology: Child abuse, child development and social policy* (pp. 7–73). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp.] as modified by English and LONGSCAN [English, D. J., & the LONGSCAN Investigators. (1997). Modified maltreatment classification system (MMCS). Retrieved from <http://www.iprc.unc.edu/longscan/>]. Fifteen items of parental behavior deemed emotionally abusive were coded and organized into four subtypes of emotional abuse (*spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting*) using the Brassard and Donovan (2006) framework.

Results: Using this coding system, almost 50% of the sample were found to have experienced emotional abuse in contrast to 9% identified at the time of referral by DCFS. Most of the emotionally abused youth also experienced physical abuse (63%) and/or neglect (76%) as well. The most frequent subtype of emotional abuse experienced was *terrorizing*. Most youth experienced more than one subtype.

Conclusions: Emotional abuse, while frequent, was seldom the focus of the child protection services investigation. The nature of this abuse was not minor, but rather likely to be dangerous to the mental health and well-being of these children. Further more emotional abuse, in this sample of young adolescents, at least, was likely to be accompanied by other forms of maltreatment, especially physical abuse and/or neglect. These findings have important implications for practice and the direction of future research.

Practice implications: All those who interact with child welfare clients must recognize the prevalence of emotional abuse in maltreated children so that appropriate interventions are instituted. Screening for emotional abuse should be part of all intake referrals and when

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confirmed should be noted in official records. When children are placed, foster parents (both kin and non-kin) need training on the prevalence and consequences of emotional abuse, and strategies to help their foster children recover from the aftermath. When children remain with maltreating parents, emotional abuse should be a focus of the interventions designed to help maltreating parents with more effective parenting strategies and also should be a focus of the interventions designed to help the child recover from the consequences of maltreatment.

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Introduction

It has long been noted that research to advance knowledge about the causes and consequences of different forms of child abuse and neglect has been hampered by lack of attention to, and lack of clarity about, definitions and classification (Besharov, 1981; National Research Council, 1993; Zigler, 1980). While this has been true about all forms of maltreatment, it is especially true for emotional or psychological abuse for at least two reasons. For one, when the Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) was enacted in 1974 to ensure the development of programs and services for abused children and their families, specific definitions were given for certain types of maltreatment (e.g., sexual abuse), but no definition was provided for emotional abuse. Instead, that task was left explicitly to the states. The State of California, the site of the present study, developed the following definition of emotional abuse: “. . .nonphysical mistreatment, resulting in disturbed behavior by the child, such as severe withdrawal or hyperactivity. Emotional abuse includes willfully causing any child to suffer, inflicting mental suffering, or endangering a child’s emotional well-being (Legislative Analysts Office, 1996).” Unlike definitions for physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, not only is this definition vague, but no mention is made of specific parental behaviors that might constitute “nonphysical mistreatment” or “inflicting mental suffering”.

Much of the research on child abuse and neglect that has proliferated in the last several decades, especially that focusing on physical or sexual abuse, has used samples recruited from protective service agencies and thus been based at least implicitly on the state or Federal definitions. While fundamental problems can arise when psychological or social science researchers take definitions developed for legal or administrative purposes and use them to define constructs in scientific research, at least these definitions can serve as a starting point, tied as they often are not only to sample recruitment decisions but to other important elements of research design as well.

A second reason for this lack of attention to definitions may be that there is a weaker societal consensus about how to distinguish emotional abuse from suboptimal parenting than there is for other forms of abuse, especially physical and sexual abuse which are also perceived as more dangerous and more prevalent and thus requiring more attention from the child protection agencies responsible for the safety and well-being of the children under their supervision (Feerick & Snow, 2006). In fact, the incidence of emotional abuse as counted by both Federal and local agencies does appear less prevalent than other forms of maltreatment. For example, in the latest Federal report of statistics of reported cases of maltreatment, 59,746 children were victims of psychological abuse or 6.9% of the total number of maltreated children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, 2007). And Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) reports that, in 2007, for new reports of child abuse and neglect, the incidence of emotional abuse ranged from 6.6% to 8.5% of the total cases each month with a median for the year of 7.8%. But the question remains: How can we know how prevalent something is when we have not defined it?

In contrast to this lack of definitions coming from Federal and state legislation surrounding child maltreatment, there have been important strides in defining emotional abuse deriving from several decades of social science and mental health research. These efforts have recently been comprehensively organized and summarized by Brassard and Donovan (2006). These authors have developed a classification system based first on a definition framework published by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, 1995). They further reviewed all the extant research definition schemes (nine total developed from 1979 to 2002: see Fig. 7.1; Brassard & Donovan, 2006) and indicated the degree to which each of these indicated different subcategories of parental/caregiver behavior to the child. Thus in these cases, in contrast to the vague definition cited above, all of the definitional systems were based on parental/caregiver behaviors rather than on maladaptive development of the child. The APSAC system had six main categories of parental behavior deemed emotionally abusive: *spurning*, *terrorizing*, *isolating*, *exploiting/corrupting*, *denying emotional responsiveness*, and *mental health/medical/legal neglect*. The Brassard and Donovan (2006) system involved developing from 2 to 5 subcategories of behaviors for each of these 6 larger categories (total = 22). For example, subcategories for *isolating* are “confining within environment” and “restricting social interactions in community”. They then summarized the nine definitional systems in terms of these subcategories to determine how comparable the systems were to one another and how comprehensive vis-à-vis the six APSAC categories. One of the outcomes of this effort is the realization that there is a fair amount of consensus among researchers of the varied types of parental/caregiver behaviors that constitute emotional abuse. The Brassard and Donovan (2006) chapter provides an excellent framework for research on emotional research grappling with the problems of definition and classification.

The main purpose of this paper is to use the Brassard and Donovan (2006) framework to examine and describe the nature of emotional abuse experienced by a sample of urban, ethnically diverse male and female youth identified as maltreated by a very large public child welfare agency. Questions addressed include:

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