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Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): a conceptual framework

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Abstract

Objective: Emotional abuse and neglect is an under-recognized, but actually common, form of child abuse. Professionals in the field continue to find difficulty in recognizing and operationally defining it, and experience uncertainty about proving it legally. There are also questions about intervention and therapy to protect the child in the least detrimental manner. These difficulties have led to delays in recognition and protective intervention. Emotional abuse and neglect are defined as a carer-child relationship that is characterized by patterns of harmful interactions, requiring no physical contact with the child. Motivation to harm the child is not necessary for the definition. Unlike sexual abuse that is a secret activity, these forms of ill treatment are easily observable. The child's development is impaired in all domains of functioning but, not being specific to emotional abuse and neglect, cannot be regarded as diagnostic.

Method: Research, clinical experience and theoretical considerations have led to a conceptual framework and operational definitions of five categories of harmful interactions between parent and child. This framework is contrasted with the APSAC categories.

Results: It is postulated that the different categories of ill treatment respectively require different therapeutic interventions.

Conclusion: Concerns about the presence of emotional abuse need to trigger an assessment process that includes identifying the nature of the abusive or neglectful interactions and a time-limited trial of specific interventions. The family's response to this process and its outcome will determine the need for statutory involvement, as well as providing a basis for litigation if this is required. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Psychological maltreatment; Emotional abuse and neglect; Definitions

Introduction

This article explores the place of emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment within the overall context of child abuse and neglect. It revisits definitional issues and briefly considers professional intervention. The focus in this article is on the relationship between the primary caregiver(s) and the child. It needs to be acknowledged that this relationship is invariably nested within the family which is, in turn, significantly influenced by the social environment in which the family is located, and influenced by family members' own histories.

In considering child abuse and neglect in general, and psychological maltreatment in particular, a central premise is that responsibility for ensuring that the relationship between the parent and the child is nonabusive or neglectful lies with the parent. Children can be temperamentally difficult, provocative or, in some cases, have physical or psychological conditions that cause serious stress for the parent and challenge their ability to cope. However, if the parents are unable to cope, responsible action is to seek help. If the parents, for whatever reason, are unable to seek help, the responsibility lies with others to intervene on behalf of both the child and the parent.

It is now increasingly accepted that emotional abuse and neglect cause significant harm to the child's development and that this harm extends into adult life (Hart, Binggeli, & Brassard, 1998). Evidence for this has come from a number of follow-up and longitudinal studies which consistently show that emotional abuse and neglect in childhood are associated significantly with a wide range of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive difficulties in later childhood (Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989), adolescence (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, Egolf, & Wu, 1991; Skuse et al., 1998), and adulthood (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996). However, in these studies, emotional abuse has either been inferred from descriptions of parent-child interactions, or different operational definitions of the actual term have been used in the various studies.

O'Hagan (1995) has suggested that emotional and psychological abuse are usefully distinguished from each other. Psychological abuse is defined as impeding the mental (especially cognitive) and moral faculties. This distinction is not considered to be useful since cognition and emotion are not independent of each other, cognitive appraisal of experiences contributing to the affective experience and vice versa.

The place of psychological maltreatment in the overall context of child abuse & neglect

Not infrequently, different forms of child abuse and neglect coexist (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). In one study, psychological maltreatment, measured separately, was found in a majority (90%) of children who had also been physically abused and neglected (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991). Moreover, they found that the psychological maltreatment was more strongly predictive of subsequent impairments in the children's development than the severity of physical abuse. Beyond the physical injury that can result from the various forms of child abuse and neglect, most of the sequelae of all forms of abuse

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