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Child emotional maltreatment: a 2-year study of US Army cases^{☆,☆☆}

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Abstract

Objective: Reports of childhood emotional maltreatment have increased greatly over the past decade. The objective of this research was to determine the types of emotional maltreatment substantiated in a community of US Army families residing temporarily in Germany. Such a description may help to improve the understanding of how a jurisdictional body defines emotional maltreatment in day-to-day practice.

Method: Data were obtained from a review of the minutes of case review committees (CRCs) for 181 cases of child emotional abuse in 1997–1998. We determined the type, number, and severity of incidents, the substantiation rate, and the situations to which children were exposed.

Results: The most frequently substantiated type of incident was witnessing domestic violence, 60% of all cases. Primary emotional abuse was found in 26% of cases, while emotional abuse in conjunction with child physical abuse or child neglect was found in 14% of cases. The more severe the case, the more likely it was to be substantiated.

Conclusions: Emotional maltreatment was substantiated more as a single type than in combination with other forms of maltreatment. Seeing emotional abuse as a single entity may allow clinicians to focus on a relationship or situation (such as spouse abuse) that is potentially harmful to a child. However, recognizing the emotionally abusive aspects of child physical abuse and neglect could allow an expanded treatment plan that could include treatment of the emotionally abusive behavior to

☆ The opinions expressed by the authors are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.

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strengthen the relationship of the caregiver to the child, in addition to the focus on the physical abuse and neglect. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Introduction

Psychological maltreatment has been called the core issue in child abuse and neglect (Garbarino, Guttman, & Seeley, 1986; Garbarino & Vondra, 1987; Hart, Germain, & Brassard 1987; Navarre, 1987; Hart, Binggeli, & Brassard, 1998), characterized as unifying the dynamics that underlie all forms of child abuse and neglect (Hart & Brassard, 1987). It has been suggested that psychological maltreatment is more closely tied to negative outcomes than is physical abuse (Crittenden, Claussen, & Sugarman, 1994). Psychological maltreatment has serious consequences for children, but the reasons for its negative consequences are not well understood (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991). Given that this form of child abuse is not new (Garrison, 1987; Thompson & Kaplan, 1996), surprisingly little has been published on the topic. Among the difficulties in studying it have been shifts of interest in various forms of child maltreatment (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse), lack of integration of research findings across areas (compartmentalization), and isolation from theory (Rosenberg, 1987). Other barriers have been the lack of definitions and standards (particularly in the absence of observable physical injury), the reluctance of the judicial system to become involved in families, and the increasing overlap and politicization of this form of child abuse with the abuse of women.

Definitions, measures, and theory

Garbarino, Guttman, and Seeley (1986) considered psychological maltreatment to be an attack by an adult on a child's development of self and social competence in a pattern of behavior that could take five forms: rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, and corrupting. They believed that the term psychological maltreatment was preferable to emotional abuse because it subsumes both affective and cognitive aspects of child maltreatment. (We found little consistency in the literature between the use of the term psychological abuse and emotional abuse. We prefer to use the term emotional abuse in this paper since this is the term the US Army uses for its cases of emotional maltreatment.)

Hart, Germain, and Brassard (1987), and Hart and Brassard (1987) recommended the development of operational definitions of psychological maltreatment embodying unambiguous and tested standards. They suggested operationally defining psychological maltreatment by caregivers as spurning (rejecting and hostile degradation), terrorizing, isolating, exploiting or corrupting acts, and denying emotional responsiveness (Hart & Brassard, 1991). Other definitions have emphasized the consequences for the child rather than the behavior of the caregiver (Somer & Braunstein, 1999). These include acts that threaten the development of a positive self-concept (Garbarino, Guttman, & Seeley, 1986), basic psychological needs

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