



# Emotional Abuse & Young Children

**C**hild Abuse in today's society is a very complicated issue.

For those people working with children (parents, Early Childhood Educators, babysitters, etc...), recognition of possible abuse is a necessary skill.

Any professional who fails to report a suspected case of abuse may face criminal charges for not reporting their suspicion.

## **D**efinition of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse exists when people verbally or through their behavior belittle, criticize, dominate, or reject a child on a continual basis or in an inappropriate way.

Emotional abuse can cause children to become...

- ✘ Poorly adjusted emotionally and Psychologically.

**E**motional abuse is often associated with neglect, or Physical or sexual abuse.

**S**ocial, **h**ealth, and **e**nvironmental

factors increase the risk of all forms of abuse. A single factor may not lead to abuse, but in combination they can create the social and emotional pressures that lead to emotional abuse.

**T**he child in a family who may be experiencing physical, mental or social problems can be frustrating and stressful to other family members which in turn places the child at risk for emotional abuse.

*Social problems that can contribute to family stress may include:*

- ☞ Unemployment,
- ☞ Poverty,

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Center of Excellence ♦ Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute ♦ Florida Children's Forum  
Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters ♦ Hillsborough County head start ♦ Hillsborough County Even Start

- ☞ Isolation from relatives and friends,
- ☞ A major crisis (divorce or death),
- ☞ Immature parent(s),
- ☞ Illness of any family member,

*Health crisis such as:*

- ☞ Hospitalization of a family member,
- ☞ A physical disability of a family member,
- ☞ Drug & alcohol abuse within the family.

*Mental health problems may include:*

- ☞ Depression,
- ☞ Mental disability, or
- ☞ Poor self-control of a family member.

**P**eople who emotionally abuse children are more intent upon hurting a child's feelings than those who abuse children through neglect.

They may be unwilling or unable to provide affection or stimulation for the child in the course of daily care.

**C**hildren can also be emotionally abused by frequently exposing them to family violence or by placing inappropriate demands on them.

*Characteristics of Emotional Abuse...*

Children who are emotionally abused are often...

- ★ very loyal to the parent &
- ★ are afraid of being punished if they tell,
- ★ Or may think it is a normal way of life!

**A**ny persistent abnormal behavioral change noticed in a child may indicate emotional abuse.

*Behavioral Indicators of an Emotionally Abused Child...*

Any of the following symptoms may be exhibited by a normal child, but a change in pattern, especially in severity or frequency, may indicate emotional abuse.

Inappropriate behavior that is immature or more mature for the child's age

Dramatic behavioral changes for example, the child may start disrupting child care activities clinging or compulsively seeking affection & attention

Uncooperative and aggressive,

Destructive or antisocial behavior.

Withdrawn and sad almost all the time

Poor relationships with other

children and lack of self-confidence

Unusual fears for the child's age: the child may fear going home, being left alone, or particular objects.

Reacts without emotion and unable to bond with others.

Bed-wetting or loss of bowel control in a child who has learned to use the toilet

**M**any of the behavioral indicators above can be found in any situation that produces severe stress in a child, not just emotionally abused children.

**I**f problems are observed, a careful assessment of the family and other sources of stress must be considered by appropriate, skilled professionals.

*Behavioral Indicators of an Abusing Adult...*

**H**ere Are characteristics that may be observed in the abusing adult:

- always assumes the child is at fault
- blames or belittles the child in public
- describes the child negatively
- openly admits dislike or hate for the child
- threatens severe punishment

withdraws comfort as a means of discipline

emotionally cold

un-supportive

severe family disharmony including violence

alcohol and drug abuse

unrealistic expectations of the child's behavior

Indicators of Possible Emotional Abuse

**T**o identify and confirm emotional abuse, it is necessary to observe the parent-child interaction on varied and repeated occasions.

⇒ Children seldom complain directly about emotional abuse.

⇒ The consequences of emotional abuse to the child can be serious and long-term.

⇒ Emotionally abused children may fail to thrive satisfactorily or their developmental progress may be slow.

**T**hey may become depressed or develop other serious behavioral disturbances, including

✱ anxiety,

- \*withdrawal and
- \*low self-esteem.

*What to do if Emotional Abuse is Suspected...*

A suspicion of emotional abuse may be based on observation of physical or behavioral indicators, or the child may disclose emotional abuse to the caregiver. Caregivers can take action regardless of whether the suspected offender is within the child's home, child care setting, or in the community.

**I**t is the caregiver's responsibility to report, not investigate, any suspicions of emotional abuse. The investigation will be done by the child protection agency.

**I**f caregivers are concerned about emotional abuse but not sure it has actually occurred, they can seek direction first from their supervisor.

**E**ach center should have a written protocol and on site training for dealing with suspected child abuse at their center.

**T**ogether with the director you can decide the best procedure for dealing with the situation and for contacting your local child protection agency.

Since emotional abuse is difficult to identify and confirm,

**T**he best course of action is a multidisciplinary team approach. The team will likely include a...

- ✎ child protection worker,
- ✎ a physician,
- ✎ a psychiatrist or psychologist,
- ✎ a public health nurse,
- ✎ a childcare staff, and
- ✎ for school-age children, their teacher.

Child Care Action Page:

"<http://www.freenet.hamilton.on.ca/~>.

This page has been adapted from the above web page created and maintained by Neil Fowler, E.C.E.

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For more information contact:



**The Center for Parent Involvement** (FCPI) was funded by the U.S. Department of Education; Goals 2000, Educate America Act from 1994-1999. Guided by an advisory board of parents and professionals, the FCPI's goal was to tap the power of parents.

The FCPI gathered information on parent needs, coordinated the information, and created a series of resources organized by theme, including fact sheets for parents and professionals, "Beyond the Basics" resources, and resource identification lists. Many of the resources have been translated into Spanish language versions, and every effort has been made to preserve the meaning and flavor of the original English documents. This series of materials provides a wealth of current information for both parents and providers; the complete set of resources can be obtained in PDF format on the Department of Child and Family Studies Website at [www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/fcpi](http://www.fmhi.usf.edu/cfs/dares/fcpi). The staff of the FCPI are hopeful that their work will continue to help children get ready to learn for many years to come.

The series' themes include:

- Family Empowerment
- Parent Involvement
- Parenting Support
- School Readiness
- Violence in the Lives of Children
- Transition to Kindergarten

The Center was one component of a project led by Hillsborough County Center of Excellence in collaboration with the Department of Child & Family Studies at USF's de la Parte Institute and the Florida Children's Forum. Other project partners include HIPPIY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters), Hillsborough County Head Start and Hillsborough County Even Start. For more information about these projects, call 813.974.4612.

Violence & Young Children, Beyond The Basics: Emotional Abuse & Young Children

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