

Effects of Childhood Emotional Abuse

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Abstract

Emotional abuse can have an enormous impact on children. Its effects can be equivalent to, or exceed, those of other forms of abuse. In today's classrooms, educators can expect to encounter numerous children who are exposed to this form of violence in their lives. It is essential that those who work with child are aware of the signs and symptoms of this excessive mistreatment. Through education and guidance, teachers and other educational staff can become proactive and empower their students who endure and suffer from emotional abuse.

Childhood emotional abuse is the harming of a child's sense of self. It can include intimidation, social seclusion, exploitation, or regularly making unfair demands; furthermore, it may include terrorization of the child(ren), or exposure to family violence (Department of Justice Canada, 2001). The impact of emotional abuse is both overlooked and understudied, because it is considered to be less noticeable or damaging than physical or sexual abuse; however, emotional maltreatment is as equally damaging as other forms of abuse (Berzenski & Yates, 2010; Zurbriggen et al., 2010). Many children are exposed to this style of maltreatment on a regular basis in their homes or communities (Bourassa, 2007). It is imperative that those who work directly with children, especially teachers and other school staff, recognize the signs and understand the effects of emotional abuse so that help can be provided in a timely manner to prevent further negative consequences.

A common phrase relating to dealing with bullies is "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!" Unfortunately, in cases of emotional abuse, this statement is not supportive, and the words do hurt and may even cause long-lasting damage (Zurbriggen et al., 2010). As a polite society, we are taught to ignore the bullies around us in the hope that they will go away. Sometimes, the bullies do go away, but all too often they will stay and the abuse worsens (Lueders, 2002). What starts out as thoughtless words spoken in anger may escalate with more malicious intent. It is important to teach children that the "sticks and stones" phrase is wrong, that words can hurt, and that it is appropriate to defend oneself in abusive situations.

Sometimes, emotional abuse is overlooked because of what is seen as "normal" in a culture or society. There are "differences in parenting norms across cultures as well as individual differences in children's perceptions (e.g., what is considered 'yelling' in one family or by one child might not be perceived similarly in another family or by another child)" (Riggs & Kaminski, 2010, p. 75). Some cultures use emotional abuse as a disciplinary tool, and children may be taught that to be assertive or to question an authoritarian figure is impolite and unacceptable (Lewis, 2010). In many families, it is common thought that children should be seen and not heard. In these types of families, finding support to help the victim can be difficult and change may take time because it requires a change in habits and ways of thinking that have been considered to be traditional for many generations.

Emotional abuse does not leave bruises, marks, or physical pain like other forms of abuse. The victims can feel like they have been beaten, yet they have never been physically touched by the abuser. The scars left by emotional abuse, though hidden, are still very much present. The effects can be long term and are often the core of all other forms of abuse (Zurbriggen et al., 2010). The consequences are "tangible, quantifiable [and a] risk to healthy development" (Berzenski & Yates, 2010). When a child is physically or sexually abused, the bruises and pain

may heal, but it is the negative emotions associated with these forms of violence that can cause enduring emotional damage.

Experiencing emotional abuse can have damaging and lasting consequences on children's images of themselves and can lead to interpersonal problems in the future (Zurbriggen et al., 2010). These problems can include anxiety, depression, dissociation, and relationship difficulties (McPherson, 2002). Classic signs of anxiety include worry, fear of certain situations, and feelings of panic, sadness, or hopelessness. Depression is generally characterized by a loss of interest in socializing, withdrawal from friends, frequent crying, lack of enthusiasm, and thoughts of suicide or death. Temporary amnesia about certain situations, or periods of time is a classic sign of dissociation. Relationship difficulties can arise from emotional abuse, such as difficulty relating to others and social phobias. Common symptoms can include constantly being self-conscious or worried about what others are thinking about them. It is important for people working with children to be able to recognize these signs of abuse and follow proper procedures in order to reduce the long-lasting negative effects.

Children learn from those around them, and tend to imitate what they see. In cases of abuse, this theory is accurate (Milletich et al., 2010). If children live in an abusive environment, they will "come to believe that violence is acceptable for resolving conflicts and are, consequently, likely to use violence in dealing with the people around them" (Bourassa, 2007, p. 697). Aggression will be seen by these children as acceptable behaviour in future relationships due to what they have witnessed and believed to be normal in their environment growing up (Milletich et al., 2010). Counselling and educating children, and modelling appropriate emotional behaviour, are a few techniques that can be used to stop this cycle of abuse.

Emotional regulation is important for healthy relationships (Berzenski & Yates, 2010). Being able to understand the difference between helpful emotions and harmful emotions, and to enhance or reduce these emotions as needed, are important life skills. Childhood emotional abuse may cause "interference with the ability to develop adaptive coping styles, particularly with respect to emotionally charged situations or contexts" (Berzenski & Yates, 2010, p. 182). When involved in social, and often intimate, relationships, a teen who has suffered childhood emotional abuse may have difficulty reacting to these new emotionally challenging situations in an acceptable manner. Difficulty with emotional regulation can lead to issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, smoking, or inappropriate sexual behaviour. For these reasons, it is important for those who work with children to be aware of signs of emotional abuse, so they can teach the skills needed for the victims to develop healthy emotional regulation.

Early childhood emotional abuse may well perpetuate future violent situations (Berzenski & Yates, 2010). It predicates "relationship violence victimization, and perpetration, above and beyond the contributions of childhood physical abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic violence exposure" (Berzenski & Yates, 2010, p. 193). Dating aggression or victimization, and intimate partner violence, are examples of possible negative outcomes that can develop due to childhood emotional abuse. Because of these findings, those who work with children need to be educated on the signs and symptoms of emotional abuse to better diagnose, identify, and effectively deal with victims in a timely manner, so as to prevent future violent situations.

Children develop a sense of "self" through early attachment relationships (Riggs, 2010, p. 9). Unfortunately, the abuse children experience often originates from these same pinnacle relationships with their parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. The effects can vary, depending on "the frequency with which it is delivered" (Zurbriggen et al., 2010, p. 219). The closer relationship the perpetrator has with the victim, the greater the opportunity for repeated exposure, thus the greater the chance that the emotional abuse will bring about long-term effects.

Unlike the other forms, emotional abuse has a considerably significant effect when it originates from someone who has an emotional closeness to the victim (Zurbriggen et al., 2010). Children generally want to please those who are in their lives, so when their actions or feelings are met with negativity, such as anger, or sarcasm, they are left feeling shocked,

stunned, and emotionally beaten. Without an emotional connection, they may simply be words, but with an emotional bond, those words transform into feelings such as disappointment, frustration, or unhappiness. If a complete stranger were the perpetrator, the abuse would have less emotional impact, because the victims would know that they would be unlikely to see that person again; therefore there would be little need to please a stranger. However, if the same insults were to come from someone close to the victim, such as a parent or a teacher, the impact could be significant.

In cases of domestic violence, children may be exposed both directly in the event, as witnesses, by hearing or intervening in the violence, or indirectly by experiencing the after effects (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.). Nationally, between 1994 and 1999, "approximately half a million Canadian children saw or heard violence directed toward a parent" (Bunge & Locke, 2000, "Spousal Violence," para. 8). Exposure to domestic violence "contributed significantly to explaining violence perpetration" (Berzenski & Yates, 2010, p. 190) in late adolescence. Whether the children have been exposed directly or indirectly, domestic violence is likely to have some negative effects on their lives.

Statistics relating to emotional abuse are difficult to find, as many cases go unreported (Department of Justice Canada, 2001). However, it has been reported that 44% of children in the United States will be victims of abuse; with 12% of those being emotionally abused (Iannelli, 2010, para. 3). In a Canadian study, "emotional maltreatment was the primary category of substantiated maltreatment in 14% of [abuse] cases" (Trocmé et al., 2003, "Categories of Maltreatment," para. 1). Perhaps with better education, more cases will be reported and the victims will have the chance to receive the help that they need.

In an average school classroom, there will be from two to six children who have been exposed to violence in their homes (Bourassa, 2007, p. 691). For this reason, it is important for teachers and other educational staff to recognize the signs and symptoms of emotional abuse. By providing school staff with "information on screening for abuse, approaches to use with teens, ... how to recognize warning signs, develop nonjudgmental listening skills, know when to report to authorities, develop safety plan with the child, etc." (Bourassa, 2007, p. 699), they will become positive champions for the victimized child. With emotional abuse being insidious in the lives of too many children, teachers have become the front-line advocates for their students. Despite being a polite and empathetic society, childhood emotional abuse continues to escalate. As educators, we must take every opportunity to arm ourselves with knowledge and resources to educate and empower all of our students.

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