



THE HIDDEN FORM OF ABUSE

It's invisible and insidious. Yet we can bring childhood emotional maltreatment out of the shadows so families can get the help they need.

WORDS BY REBECCA DOUGLAS

Child abuse can be remarkably silent and subtle. Society at large can be reluctant to think about it, speak out about it or even acknowledge it occurs, further helping to sweep it under the rug.

Victims are left feeling broken, forgotten and voiceless.

As heinous as acts of physical and sexual abuse are, one (tiny) consolation for victims is that the general public has a decent understanding of what constitutes these forms of abuse, which can be illustrated by an individual act. Perpetrators may be skilled at covering it up, but if someone saw the act occurring, they'd likely be able to identify what they were seeing and alert the authorities.

Much murkier, though, is a form of abuse we that rarely talk about. Emotional abuse is tricky to identify partly because it's defined by a pattern of behaviour rather than a single occurrence.

042 | mindfood.com

If a parent yells at their kid every now and then for bad behaviour, it's discipline; if yelling is all they do, it's emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is made up of repeated acts and omissions, both verbal and symbolic, which communicate to the child that their needs are not important.

FINDING THE MEANING

Even among mental health professionals, the official definition of what constitutes emotional abuse is the subject of some debate.

Clinical psychologist Renee Mill defines it as the parent acting in a way that undermines their child's feelings of safety and security.

"Children need a parent who notices their child is sad and needs some help, or their child is anxious, or their child is talented in music and needs extra lessons," says Mill.

"Emotional abuse is when the child's needs are not attuned to, and they're not being met." The difficulty in defining emotional abuse is partly

due to society drawing an artificial distinction between the various forms of childhood maltreatment.

"You can't separate them—all forms of abuse have a form of emotional abuse," she says.

"It's very hard to put them into distinct categories because when you're sexually abusing a child, you're certainly not nurturing them, keeping them safe and secure, and providing them with what they need for a wholesome outcome, and similarly with physical abuse.

"It's a false type of division."

However, emotional abuse can occur on its own without the child experiencing other forms of abuse such as physical or sexual violence.

Official figures in Australia show emotional abuse as the most prevalent form of child abuse, at 59 per cent of confirmed cases, and recording the greatest increase among the various types of abuse and neglect over the past five years. There seems little doubt that the effects of

NOT ALL
ABUSE IS
CAUSED
BY CRUEL
PARENTS.

emotional abuse can be devastating. Dr Katrina Lines from children's charity Act For Kids says children who experience this form of maltreatment can develop a wide range of psychological illnesses and addictions as the years pass.

"Emotional abuse in childhood can result in debilitating long-term consequences including mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, eating disorders and obesity, alcohol and substance abuse and even suicidal behaviour later on in life," says Lines.

Experts also believe early trauma causes inflammation in the body that may lead to cardiovascular disease and autoimmune diseases such as diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease and multiple sclerosis.

SEEING THE SIGNS

Not all emotional abuse is caused by deliberately cruel, narcissistic parents. Caregivers can fall into abusive patterns without intending to or realising their behaviour is harmful. Factors such as mental illness, substance abuse, disability and socio-economic disadvantage can impact on a family's ability to care for their children's emotional state. It can also arise from not knowing how to be a good parent because their own childhood lacked proper role models who demonstrated and communicated love effectively.

Witnessing certain behaviours from caregivers may be a red flag that a child is experiencing emotional abuse, whether intentional or not.

"Warning signs can include ignoring or rejecting a child, forcing them to do things by scaring them, constantly swearing, screaming, criticising, humiliating or blaming them, treating them poorly because of things they can't change (such as disability, gender or sexuality), threatening abuse or threats to harm loved ones or pets, or exposing them to domestic violence," says Lines.

Another important sign is isolating the victim by physically or socially keeping them away from other people as much as possible to minimise the chances the child will realise other families have a different dynamic to theirs and say something to raise suspicions.

Mill says all parents have bad days every now and then, but there is a certain line a 'good enough' parent won't cross at their lowest point. She says even if you are down for a period

of time, such as in the case of a bout of depression, you can repair any emotional damage to your child by being extra-attentive and loving once you're feeling better.

Children who are being emotionally abused can display signs such as a lack of trust in adults, low self-esteem, anxiety, self-harm, abnormal sleeping and eating patterns, drug or alcohol abuse, declining performance at school, and being excessively obedient.

In families where there are several children, one sibling might be earmarked as the scapegoat and treated differently and worse than rest. When things go wrong, a well-adjusted person would shrug off the bad luck and set about fixing things or forgetting about it. An abusive adult, on the other hand, will need someone to blame, and a particular child might fulfil that role.

"Often a parent can be quite cruel to one of their children and they will hide it because you see them being nurturing to their other children, so they seem quite normal," says Mill.

Two other forms of childhood emotional abuse are 'parentification' and 'infantilisation'. Parentification is a role reversal where a child is expected to fulfil the responsibilities usually assigned to a parent.

This can be in a physical capacity (doing the housework and helping siblings get ready for school, for example) or emotionally (by being a confidante and problem-solver).

Infantilisation is the opposite end of the spectrum, where the parent treats their child as though they are younger, and fails to allow them to grow and mature in the usual way.

In each case, the child is forced to satisfy the parent's needs rather than forge their own separate identity with their family's support and understanding.

RAISING THE ALARM

What can you do if you think a child is experiencing emotional abuse? It varies according to country. For example, Australia has a mandatory system of reporting for child abuse, meaning professions such as teachers, doctors, nurses and police are required by law to alert relevant authorities if they believe a child is being maltreated. Ordinary citizens can also raise their concerns.

Meanwhile, there is no law in New Zealand that makes the reporting of abuse of children or adults mandatory.

HELP IS AT HAND

If you believe a child is in immediate danger, dial the police on 000. Otherwise, further information and support can be found through the following organisations:

- Kids Helpline kidsline.com.au
- Lifeline lifeline.org.au

However, if you think a child might be experiencing emotional abuse, it's important to contact your local child protection agency as soon as possible. Doing so could prevent a catastrophe or even save a child's life.

"Start keeping written notes as soon as you have concerns – note events you see, changes to the child's behaviour, feelings, or the words they use," says Lines. "If you have a reason to suspect a child is experiencing harm, or is at risk of experiencing harm, please contact your local child protection authorities. They can advise you on what else to do and take action to investigate the situation. If you are concerned about your own safety or relationships, you can remain anonymous."

According to Mill, adults are often hesitant to report their suspicions because of the consequences for the family, including putting the child into foster care. Yet this is a last resort and usually social workers and other forms of support will be provided so the family receives the help they need.

Another important step a loved one can take is to balance out the lack of loving signals the child receives by being a source of them yourself. Says Mill: "Attachment to any significant other has a big ameliorating effect. You can put in a lot of time making eye contact with the child, telling the child you love them, holding the child, and being there for safety and security in any way you can."

The statistics tell us how many children come into contact with child protection authorities, but the true number experiencing emotional abuse is hard to determine.

Increased mental health services and services for educating and supporting parents would go a long way towards keeping children safe.

In the meantime, however, we can all do our part by noticing the signs and reporting any concerns as soon as they arise. **MF**



VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

One in five adults in England and Wales (around 8.5 million people) have experienced abuse as a child, according to a new report.

mindfood.com/one-in-five-abused

One in 35 Australian children received child protection services in 2017-18.