

The forensic evaluation of emotional abuse of children

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VFPMS seminar 2016

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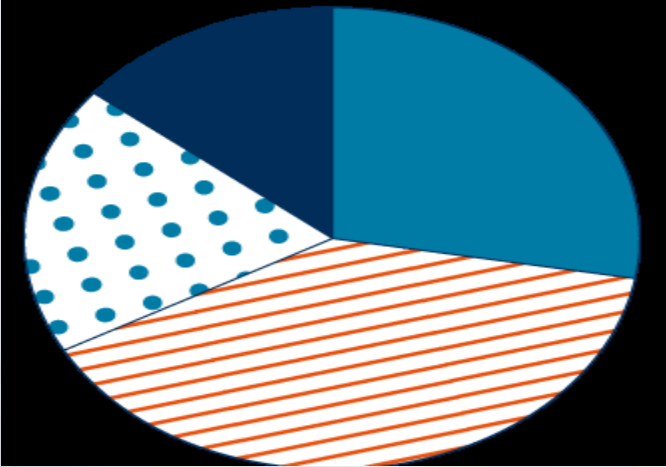
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Primary substantiated harm types Australia 2013-2014

Sexual abuse 14%

Physical abuse 19%



Neglect 28%

Emotional abuse 39%

The inter-relationship between emotional abuse and neglect



Neglect categorisation

- Physical
- Environmental
- Medical
- Supervisory
- Educational/developmental
- Abandonment
- Emotional – **emotional neglect**

Emotional maltreatment categorisation

- Spurning, rejecting, isolating
- Terrorizing
- Corrupting/exploiting
- Unreliable/inconsistent parenting
- Parentification/overprotection
- Denying/ignoring emotional responsiveness - **emotional neglect**

Co-existence



- UK data
 - 81% neglected children also emotionally abused
 - 81% physically abused children also emotionally abused
- Argument that we should acknowledge existence of E.A to raise it's profile of harm, therefore we need to;
 - **DEFINE** emotional abuse
 - Categorize the **TYPE/s** of emotional abuse occurring
 - State the **EFFECT/S** – cumulative harm
 - Make recommendations

Glaser et al Emotional abuse and emotional neglect: antecedents, operational definitions and consequences

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Concepts surrounding emotional abuse

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Living with emotional maltreatment -

- “I’m sick of this mummy. I want a new mummy. This mummy is bad. Every time I want to play on my Wii she stops me. She says I can’t play on my Wii because we always have to go to Dan Murphy’s. Then she goes to sleep and I have to hide all the wine bottles under my bed.”

Emotional Maltreatment – AAP definition

- Acts of omission or commission that inflict harm on the child's wellbeing, which may then be manifested as emotional distress or maladaptive behaviour in the child.
 - Verbal/non-verbal
 - Active or passive
 - With or without intent to harm
 - Negatively affect cognitive, social, emotional or physical development

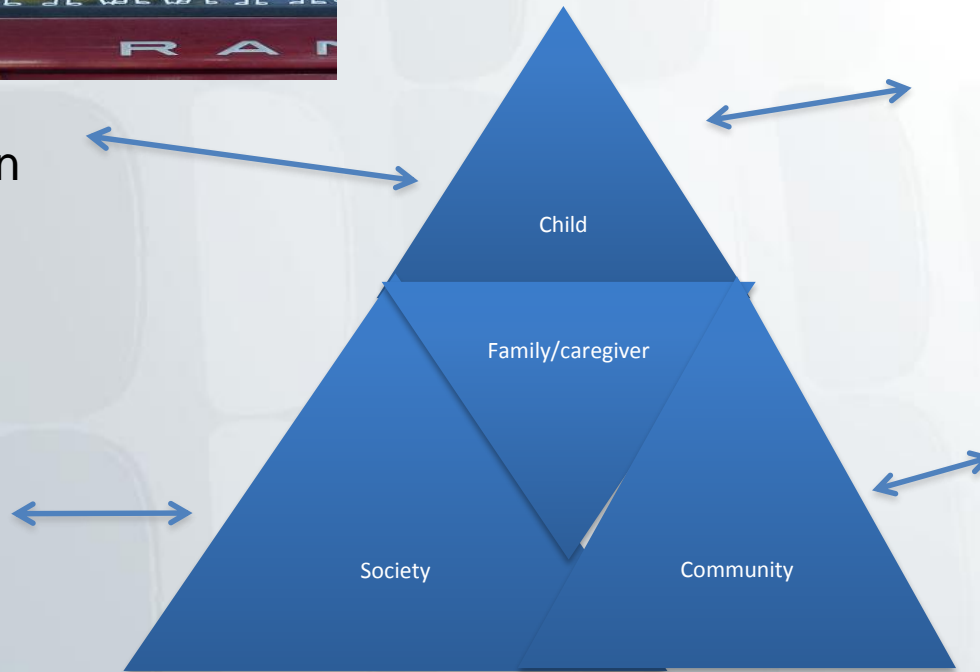
- Involves a **'relationship'** between the child and parent – a repeated pattern of damaging interactions that becomes typical of the relationship
 - Feeling unloved, worthless, flawed, unwanted
 - Serves instrumental purpose in meeting parental needs
 - Endangered
 - Undermines development and socialisation
- Chronic, pervasive or triggered by alcohol/drugs
- Isolated behaviours do not necessarily constitute emotional abuse – single painful event may.....

Ecological model of child maltreatment– the requirements



Income
Parenting style
Parental health
Parental education

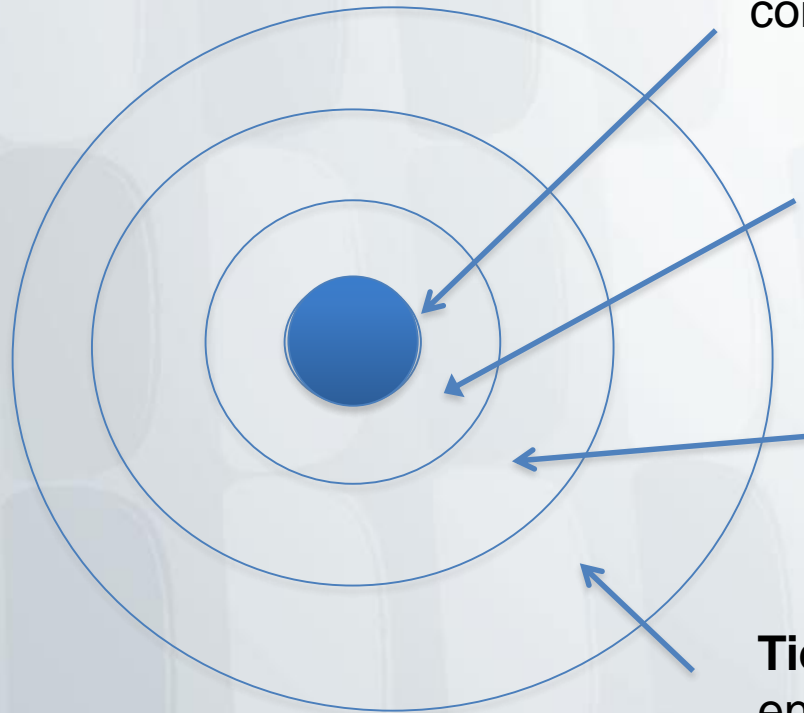
Secure attachment to consistent caregiver
Maternal physical & mental health



Economics
Population income
Employment
Immigration
Cultural attitudes
Racism
Conflict

Crime
Overcrowding
Green spaces
Policing
Education
Family supports

Tiers of concern



Tier 3 – child's functioning of concern

Tier 2 – harmful child-caregiver interaction

Tier 1 – caregiver risk factors

Tier 0 – social and environmental risk factors

Glaser, D Child abuse and neglect 2011

Degrees/thresholds



Continuum of child/caregiver interaction

Satisfactory (“good enough”) → Undesirable →

Harmful

Ways of thinking about emotional abuse – theory to practice



- **Harmful parental attributes** - “risk factors”
- **Forms of adult ill-treatment** – “mediating mechanisms”
- **Indicators of child impairment** – “harm”
- If we can identify specifics for each category then very helpful

Harmful parental attributes	Forms of adult ill-treatment	Indicators of impairment
Mental illness (including attempted suicide)	Denying emotional responsiveness “neglect”	Behaviour
Family violence	Negative attributes - Spurning/rejection/denigration/interacting with hostility/blame	Emotional state
Alcohol abuse	Terrorizing (including witnessing IPV)	Peer relationships
Drug abuse	Isolating/failure to promote socialization/exploiting/corrupting	Developmental/educational attainment
	Unreliable/inconsistent parenting	Physical state
	Developmentally inappropriate interactions/expectations	
	Failure to recognize boundaries (including fabricated illness)	

Harmful parental attributes

Glaser



Parental attribute	% of children in sample
	N=85
Mental illness including suicide attempt/threat	38%
Family violence	28%
Alcohol and/or drug abuse	21%

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Forms of ill-treatment

Glaser

Forms of adult ill-treatment	% of children in sample affected
Developmentally inappropriate interactions (inability to control, inappropriate impositions and exposures, overprotection)	42%
Denigration or rejection	36%
Emotionally unavailability/neglect	31%
Using child for adult's emotional needs	8%
Mis-socialisation	1%

Indicators of impairment 1

Glaser

Indicator of impairment in development - HARM	% of children
Emotional state * unhappy/low self esteem/fear 38%	63%
Behaviour * Oppositional 26%	49%
Developmental/educational attainment	47%
Peer relationships	35%
Physical state *physically neglected/unkempt 18%	35%
Other (sexualized behaviour)	9%

Indicators of impairment 2

Glaser

Domains of impairment	Number of children
No domain	9
1 domain	17
2 domains	19
3 domains	26
4 domains	11
5 domains	6
6 domains	1
Total	89

Outcomes

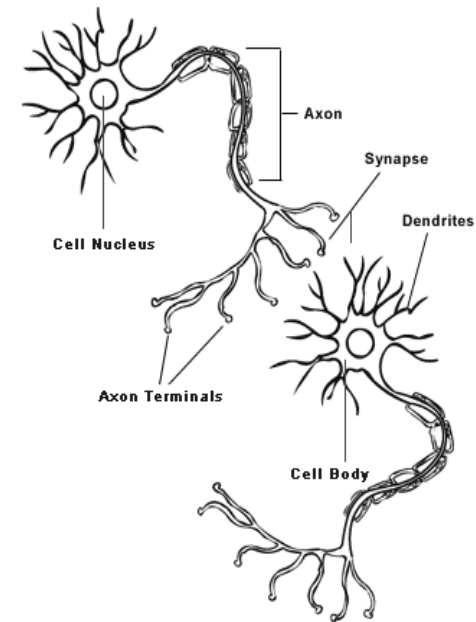
- Known to services for mean length of time of 4.06 years prior to being registered
- Mean age higher for registration for EA than other abuse forms
- High rate of removal from home – indicative of serious harm resulting from EA
- Good prognosis when child re-homed
- Parental acknowledgment of EA associated with better prognosis

What are the effects on the brain from exposure to stress as a result of emotional abuse and neglect? - The biological model of abuse

- Effects on **structure and development of brain** – synapses and brain maturation
- Effect on the **endocrine system**
- **Epigenetics**
- Biological explanations for emotional, behavioural and psychological effects observed
- **Lasting and 'transmissible' effects of child neglect and emotional maltreatment**

1. Effect on brain development

- 2 important process – **myelination** and **synapse development**
- At birth – many brain cells, not many synapses/much myelination
- Massive brain growth - especially regulating emotion, language and abstract thought in 1st 3 years of life
- Neurotrophins act as mediators secreted in response to neuronal activity which is regulated by environmental input



Brains are wired to 'expect experiences'

eg speech, vision

- Create, strengthen, discard
- 'Sensitive' periods

• Experience expectant

- DEFICITS in stimuli ie. Neglect/attachment
- Failure of synapse development due to lack of environmental stimuli – “use it or lose it”
- May be permanent problems.

• Experience dependent

- Synapses form in response to positive or adverse stimuli
- Neural plasticity
- May adversely colour the child's world

• Experience adaptive

- How brain develops is adaptive to environment at time – maladaptive environment – maladaptive development

2. Effect on the endocrine system



- Stress = “stimulus or experience that produces a negative emotional reaction or affect including fear and a sense of loss of control”
- Stress response = physiological coping mechanism
 - positive, tolerable, **toxic**
- Abused children extreme levels of stress – “whole existence is in danger”
 - Direct effect of violence - pain, fear
 - Effect of observing IPV – fear
 - Sexual abuse – fear, powerlessness, psychological and physical pain
 - Neglect – fear of abandonment, discomfort, hunger
- HPA axis, CNA-SAM and neurotransmitters
- Excess stress – abuse or neglect/emotional maltreatment leads to inappropriate responsiveness of stress system

Stressor

Amygdala perceives stress
 Activates
 Hypothalamus

Dopamine

Pre-frontal cortex

The HPA/CAN-SAM axis

Corticotrophin Releasing Hormone

Anterior pituitary

ACTH

Adrenals

Noradrenaline/
 adrenalin

Cortisol

Early life experiences mediate expression of

- Behavioural
- Emotional
- Autonomic
- Endocrine responses to stress

Feedback loop affected by;

- Maternal tactile stimulation
- Maternal deprivation

Cumulative harm – what may happen to these children?



Extrapolating from biology to functioning – living with child abuse



- Deprivation of experiences
- Lack of empathy
- Models of aggression
- Exposure to fear and trauma
- Pain
- Emotional insults
- Lack of affect regulation
- Unpredictability
- Persistent fear response
- Hyper-arousal
- Increased internalizing symptoms
- Diminished executive functioning
 - Working memory
 - Inhibitory control
 - Cognitive flexibility
- Delayed developmental milestones
- Weakened response to negative feedback
- Complicated social interactions

Emotional development

- Anxiety
- Unhappiness
- Depression
- Low self-esteem

Interpersonal relationships

- Insecure attachment
- Social isolation
- Low empathy

Physical symptoms

- Growth
- Faecal soiling
- Non-organic pain

Behavioural problems

- Oppositional
- Aggression
- Antisocial
- Drug misuse
- Eating disorders

Learning

- Low IQ
- Educational underachievement
- Developmental delay



Why does evaluating emotional maltreatment seem so hard?

The 'clinical' approach – a summary

- **DEFINE** emotional abuse
- **IDENTIFY RISK FACTORS** - harmful caregiver attributes
- **STATE MEDIATING MECHANISMS** – the forms of ill-treatment – categorising emotional abuse
- **OUTLINE EFFECTS** – indicators of child impairment – harm
- **RECOMMENDATIONS** – ecological model, strengths and weaknesses

Practice and policy

- Late identification the norm – ‘cumulative harm’
- Prevention
 - Primary prevention by public policy & education
 - Secondary prevention – at risk families
- Early intervention –address totality of the child’s life - nurturance, stability, predictability, understanding, support. “Support families to care”
- Change view from hostile and uncaring world to caring and supportive world

Strategies



Evidence base limited – therapeutic intervention mainstay

- Therapeutic trial of capacity to change
- Community based programs - positive parenting skills education
- Therapeutic day care
- Address parental factors – drug/alcohol/mental health/IPV
- Out of home placements

References & resources

- Emotional abuse and emotional neglect: antecedents, operational definitions and consequences; Glaser D et al 2015
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