The forensic evaluation of emotional abuse of children

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VFPM seminar 2016
Primary substantiated harm types Australia 2013-2014

- Emotional abuse: 39%
- Physical abuse: 19%
- Sexual abuse: 14%
- Neglect: 28%
### The inter-relationship between emotional abuse and neglect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neglect categorisation</th>
<th>Emotional maltreatment categorisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Spurning, rejecting, isolating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Terrorizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>Corrupting/exploiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisory</td>
<td>Unreliable/inconsistent parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational/developmental</td>
<td>Parentification/overprotection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abandonment</td>
<td>Denying/ignoring emotional responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional – emotional neglect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Image source: [The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne](https://www.royalchildrens.org.au)
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
Concepts surrounding emotional abuse
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

Child

Family/caregiver

Secure attachment to consistent caregiver
Maternal physical & mental health

Income
Parenting style
Parental health
Parental education

Economics
Population income
Employment
Immigration
Cultural attitudes
Racism
Conflict

Society

Community

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
Continuum of child/caregiver interaction

Satisfactory ("good enough") → Undesirable → Harmful

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parental attribute</th>
<th>% of children in sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness including suicide attempt/threat</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family violence</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol and/or drug abuse</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=85
## Forms of ill-treatment

Glaser

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forms of adult ill-treatment</th>
<th>% of children in sample affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developmentally inappropriate interactions (inability to control, inappropriate impositions and exposures, overprotection)</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denigration or rejection</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally unavailability/neglect</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using child for adult’s emotional needs</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mis-socialisation</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Indicators of impairment 1

*Glaser*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator of impairment in development - HARM</th>
<th>% of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional state</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* unhappy/low self esteem/fear 38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Oppositional 26%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental/educational attainment</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer relationships</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical state</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*physically neglected/unkempt 18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (sexualized behaviour)</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Indicators of impairment 2

*Glaser*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of impairment</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No domain</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 domain</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 domains</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 domains</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 domains</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 domains</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 domains</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 processes – **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

Corticotrophin Releasing Hormone

Anterior pituitary

ACTH

Adrenals

Cortisol

Feedback loop affected by:
• Maternal tactile stimulation
• Maternal deprivation

Early life experiences mediate expression of
• Behavioural
• Emotional
• Autonomic
• Endocrine responses to stress

Pre-frontal cortex

Dopamine

Noradrenaline/adrenalin

The HPA/CAN-SAM axis
Cumulative harm – what may happen to these children?

Wounds scar the flesh, but words scar the soul.
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

Behavioural problems
• Oppositional
• Aggression
• Antisocial
• Drug misuse
• Eating disorders

Interpersonal relationships
• Insecure attachment
• Social isolation
• Low empathy

Learning
• Low IQ
• Educational underachievement
• Developmental delay

Physical symptoms
• Growth
• Faecal soiling
• Non-organic pain

Hart et al 2010
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

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- The neuroendocrinological sequelae of stress during brain development: the impact of child abuse and neglect; Panzer; African Journal of psychiatry Feb 2008

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