

# The forensic evaluation of the emotional maltreatment of children

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*not all  
wounds  
are  
visible*

# Emotional Maltreatment –AAP definition



“A repeated pattern of extreme incident(s) of **caretaker behaviour** that **thwart the child’s basic psychological needs** (safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey that a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another’s needs and/or expendable”

**Intention to harm not required**

Melbourne Children's  
A world leader  
in child and  
adolescent  
health



Murdoch  
Childrens  
Research  
Institute



- Involves a **‘relationship’** between the child and parent
  - a repeated pattern of damaging interactions that becomes typical of the relationship
    - Undermines development and socialisation
    - Incorporates negative ideas into sense of self
    - Increases risk of psychopathology including violence
- Usually chronic, pervasive
- May be triggered by alcohol/drugs – may be single extreme incident
- **“Soul murder”** – pervasively and insidiously destructive

# Co-existence of EA with other abuse types

- 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 its 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*



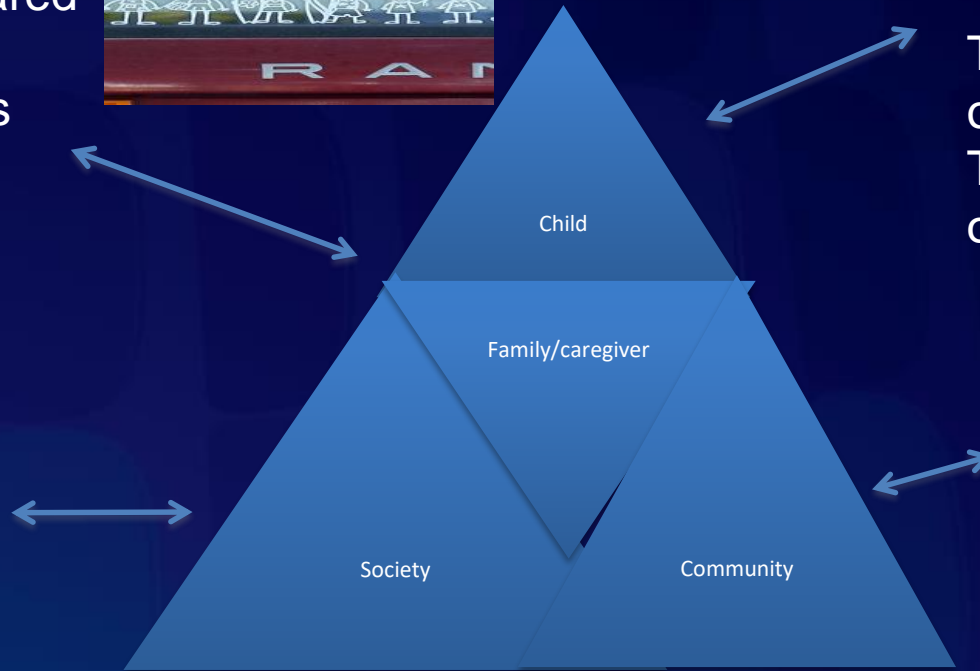
# Concepts surrounding emotional abuse

# Ecological model of child EM – humans as psychological beings'



To be loved and cared for  
To be respected as unique and valued

To love and care for others  
To have control in one's life



To be safe from danger and fear  
Not to be shunned, bullied, isolated  
To be protected from corrupting influences

**Basic human right**  
**Affects evolving capacities, identity and behaviour**

To be safe from danger  
To be safe from racial prejudice  
Not to be imprisoned, detained, persecuted

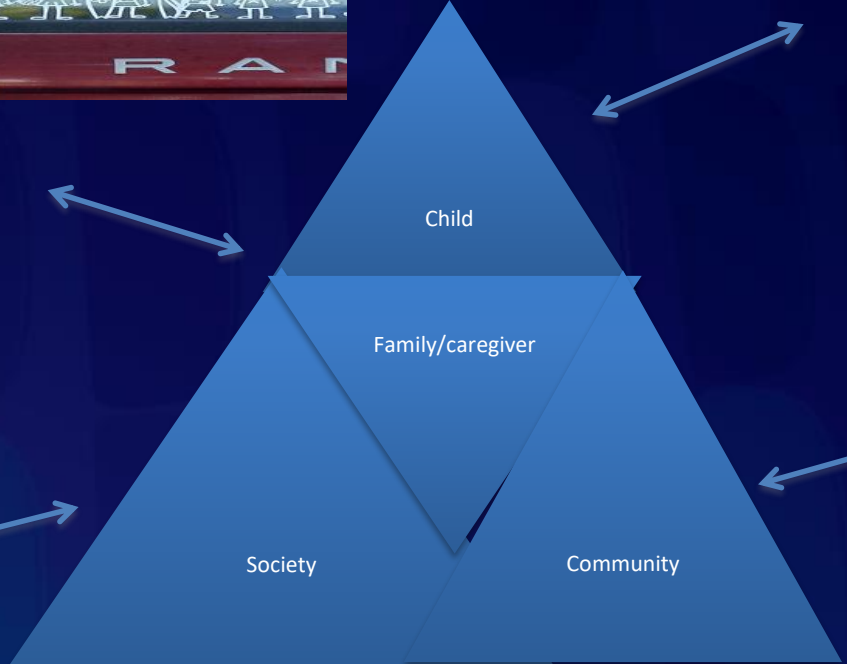
# Ecological model of child EM – risk factors



Large ratio children/adults  
 Father absence  
 Aberrant parent substitute  
 Low extended family support  
 FV, substance abuse  
 Mental illness



High maintenance stages  
 Disability  
 Temperament  
 Negative mood/behaviour



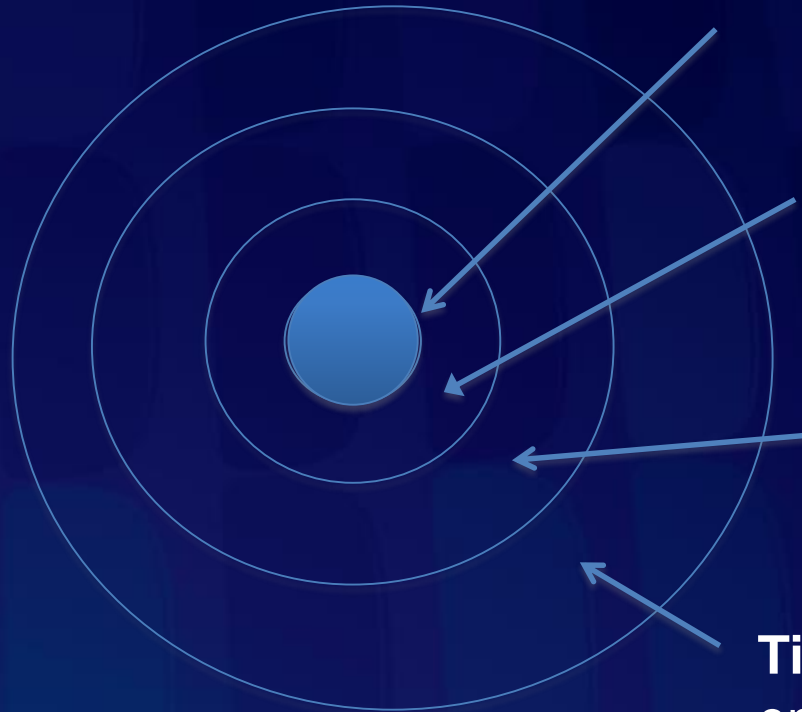
Low expectation for parenting  
 Inadequate prevention/corrective response to violence  
 Poverty  
 Substance abuse, criminality etc

Tolerance to FV  
 Poor view of child rights

**Basic human right**  
**Affects evolving capacities, identity and behaviour**

# Tiers of concern as applied to EM

**Tier 3** – child's functioning of concern – indicators of impairment – “harm”



**Tier 2** – **harmful child-caregiver interaction** – categories of EM

**Tier 1** – caregiver risk factors – drugs, alcohol, mental health

**Tier 0** – social and environmental risk factors

*Glaser, D Child abuse and neglect 2011*



# Ways of thinking about emotional abuse – theory to practice



Harmful parental attributes (tier 1)	Forms of adult ill-treatment (tier 2)	Indicators of impairment (tier 3)
Mental illness	<b>Negative attributes</b>	<b>Behaviour</b>
Family violence	<b>Exploiting/corrupting</b>	<b>Emotional state</b> – depression, anxiety, suicide and self-harm
Alcohol abuse	<b>Terrorizing</b>	<b>Peer relationships</b>
Drug abuse	<b>Denying emotional responsiveness</b>	<b>Developmental/educational attainment</b>
	<b>Isolating/failure to promote socialization</b>	<b>Physical health</b>
	<b>Developmentally inappropriate interactions/expectations/unreliable or inconsistent parenting</b>	
	<b>Failure to recognize boundaries</b>	

## Negative attributes- Spurning/rejecting/belittling

- Belittling/degrading/hostility/rejection of child/sig others
- Shaming/ridiculing/humiliating the child – eg normal emotions
- Singling out
- Spurning, damaged due to abuse, deserves abuse



## Terrorising

- Exposing to frightening, dangerous, chaotic situations
- Threatening to abandon
- Threatening or perpetrating violence to child/loved one
- Rigid parenting with threats if expectations are not met

## Exploiting/corrupting

- Modelling, encouraging, permitting antisocial behaviour
- Modelling, encouraging, permitting trust betrayal or cruelty to another
- Incest, sexual grooming

## Isolating

- Confining the child/limiting freedom
- Restricting social interactions including as a result of EN or physical neglect

## Developmentally inappropriate expectations/interactions

- Undermining child's important relationships
- Parentification
- Dominance, coercion, intrusiveness, double binds, falsehoods
- Rigid, harsh, inconsistent parenting

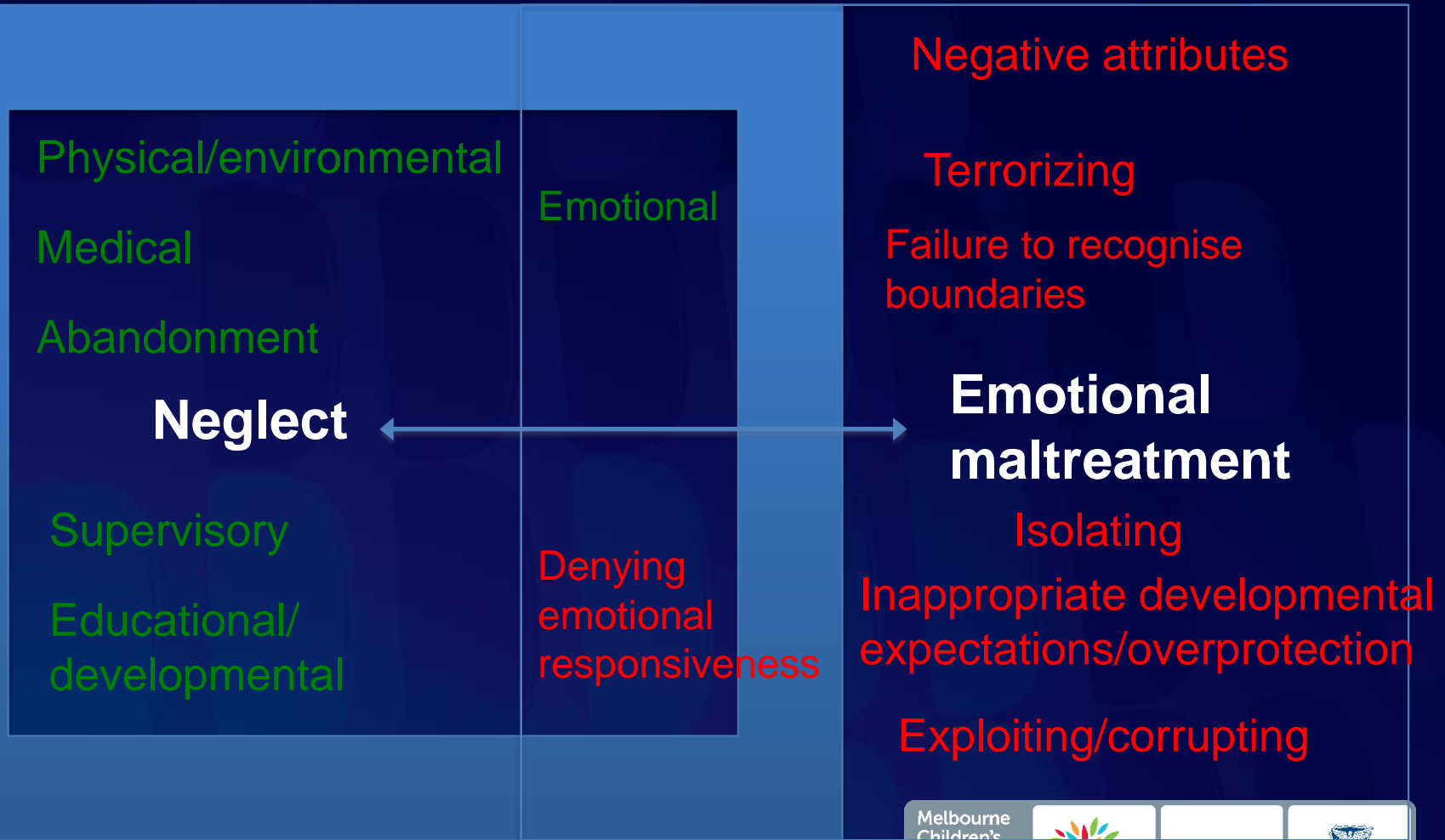
## Emotional unresponsiveness/neglect

- Detached due to incapacitation/lack of motivation
- Failure to express warmth, affection, love
- Inattentive to child's needs to be safe and secure

## Failure to recognise boundaries

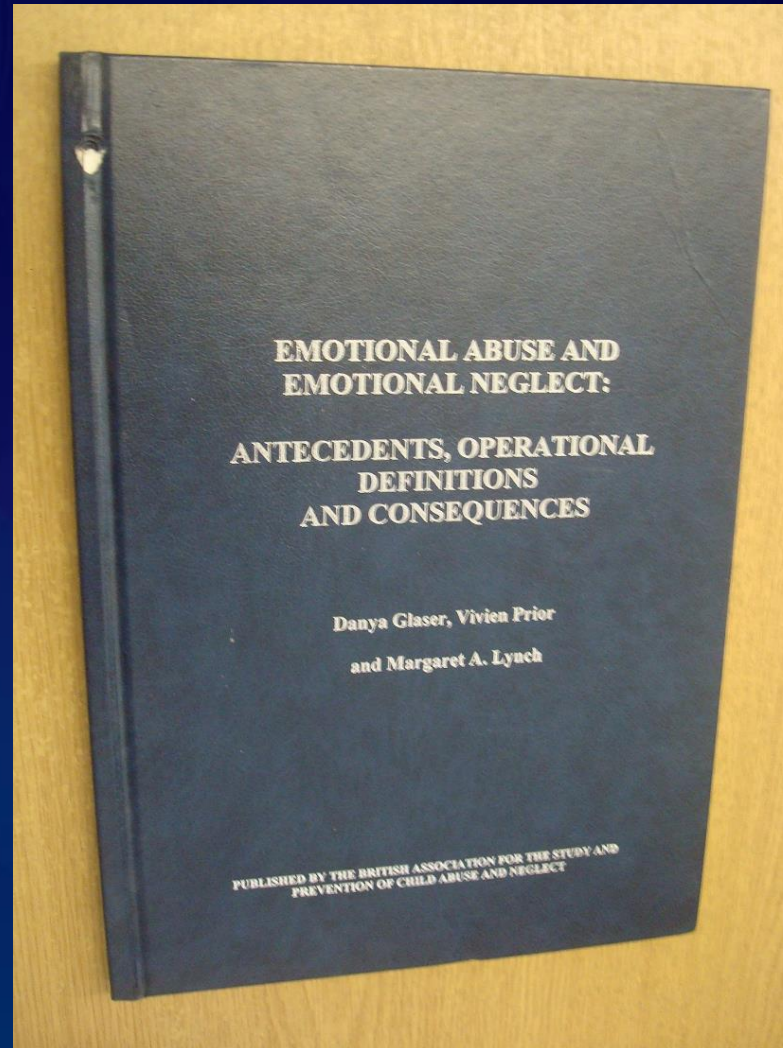
- Factitious illness by proxy
- Using child in inter-parental disputes

# Categorization and inter-relationship of neglect and EA



# ***“Emotional abuse and emotional neglect: antecedents, operational definitions and consequences”***

***Glaser et al 2001***



# Harmful parental attributes

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

# Forms of ill-treatment

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

# Indicators of impairment 1

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



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

# Cumulative harm – what happens to these children?

- Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 – must consider the effects of cumulative patterns of harm on a child's safety and development sec 10 (3) e
- Complex trauma
  - Disturbed attachment and affect regulation
  - Shifts in emotional states and behavior
  - Aggressive behavior and self-endangering behaviors
  - Self-hatred, self-blame, feelings of ineffectiveness
  - Disturbances in memory and attention
  - Disturbances in inter-personal relationships
  - Despair, suicidal preoccupation, risk taking
  - Somatisation
  - Anxiety and personality disorders

# What the children say

- Long term harm is more likely to result from emotional abuse than physical harm
- The personal meaning and perception of the child who experiences violence and abuse is weighted more heavily by the child than an actual injury in relation to the psychological distress

*Cicchetti and Toth 2000, Levy and Orlans 1998*

# PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The assessment of the emotionally  
abused child

Recognise and define emotional maltreatment

- Consider causes for child's presentation/concerns in functioning

Are harmful carer attributes present?

- Poor mental health
  - Drug and/or alcohol abuse
  - Family violence
  - Caregiver Hx of abuse
- Remember social/community Fx

What are the forms of carer ill-treatment?

- Categories
- If none identified, is there an alternative cause..?

Recognise and define emotional maltreatment

What are the identifiable current or future harms?

- Behaviour/Emotional state
- Developmental/educational attainment
- Peer relationships
- Physical state

Consider...

- Psychological support/education/Family-based therapies/support
- NGO's in-home support programs
- Rehab/behaviour change programs/parental mental health assessments
- Developmental/Paediatric assessment
- Full-time childcare
- Trial of capacity to change/alternative placement
- Identify resilience promoting factors

EA behaviour type	Information gathering (child, carer, others)
<b>Negative attributes</b>	Ask child about feelings of worth, safety, being loved, feeling happy, opportunities for socialisation.
<b>Terrorising</b>	Ask about family violence, discipline in the family, who gets angry and why, what happens when carers get angry, feelings of fear.
<b>Corrupting or exploiting</b>	Child victims of sexual exploitation, ask about drug use at home, inappropriate knowledge of drugs of abuse and effects of alcohol intoxication
<b>Unreliable/inconsistent parenting</b>	Ask child where they feel safe, who makes them feel safe, where they like to be, who cares for them, is child's wellbeing a priority?
<b>Isolating</b>	Ask child about daily tasks, who performs them, how they are done, who prepares food, who cares for younger children, role at home.
<b>Denying of emotional responsiveness - emotional neglect</b>	Security of attachment (warmth and love) Relationship with carers (reliably responsive) Is child left alone/abandoned? Changes of primary caregiver? Stable placement?
<b>Failure to recognise boundaries</b>	

# Words that count.....

- "it is a time for us to remind ourselves that our youngest, smallest citizens do have an emotional life of their own which is every bit as valid, important and vulnerable as that of older, bigger people"

# References & resources

- Emotional abuse and emotional neglect: antecedents, operational definitions and consequences; Glaser D et al 2015
- Understanding the effects of maltreatment on brain development; *Child Welfare Information Gateway April 2015*
- The effects of child maltreatment on the developing brain; Glaser D; *Medico-legal journal 2014 Vol 82 (3) 97-111*
- The neuroendocrinological sequelae of stress during brain development: the impact of child abuse and neglect; Panzer ; *African Journal of psychiatry Feb 2008*
- [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)
- [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org)
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