

Chapter 6: Child Psychological Maltreatment

Professor Bogat

CDC Definition

- “intentional caregiver behavior (i.e., act of commission) that conveys to a child that he/she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or valued only in meeting another’s needs. Psychologically abusive behaviors may include blaming, belittling, degrading, intimidating, terrorizing, isolating, restraining, confining, corrupting, exploiting, spurning, or otherwise behaving in a manner that is harmful, potentially harmful, insensitive to the child’s developmental needs, or can potentially damage the child psychologically or emotionally”

Important aspects of the definition

- It defines parental behaviors and doesn't focus on consequences of those behaviors
- Note that psychologically abusive behaviors occur on a continuum (most parents will criticize a child); but the CDC definition focuses on more extreme parenting behaviors that are unlikely to be employed by non-abusive parents

State of Michigan

- **In the State of Michigan, the guide for mandated reporters (those required by law to report child maltreatment if they suspect or witness it), has two sections that include aspects of psychological/emotional abuse. Below is the text as it appears in the guide:**

“Child Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is defined as the treatment of a child that involves cruelty or suffering that a reasonable person would recognize as excessive. Possible examples of maltreatment are:

- A parent who utilizes locking the child in a closet as a means of punishment.
- A parent who forces their child to eat dog food out of a dog bowl during dinner as a method of punishment and/or humiliation.
- A parent who responds to their child’s bed-wetting by subjecting the child to public humiliation by hanging a sign outside the house or making the child wear a sign to school, which lets others know that the child wets the bed.

Mental Injury

- A pattern of physical or verbal acts or omissions on the part of the parent and/or person responsible for the health and welfare of the child that results in psychological or emotional injury/impairment to a child **or places a child at significant risk of being psychologically or emotionally injured/impaired (e.g., depression, anxiety, lack of attachment, psychosis, fear of abandonment or safety, fear that life or safety is threatened, etc.).”**

- We can see that the first category, what is labeled “child maltreatment” in Michigan, would, by some definitions, include parental behaviors that are emotionally or psychologically abusive (e.g., the example on the prior page where the parent hangs out a sign that says the child wets the bed).
- These behaviors are in addition to those listed as causing “mental injury” —which seems to be the State of Michigan’s term for child psychological maltreatment

Eight Subtypes of Child Psychological Maltreatment

- Rejecting
- Degrading
- Terrorizing
- Isolating
- Missocializing (corrupting)
- Exploiting
- Denying emotional responsiveness
- Close confinement
- Other

Summary of Definition Issues

- There are difficulties defining what child psychological maltreatment is
- However, research continues to make progress
- Good news: in one study both laypeople and professionals showed consensus on which parental behaviors constituted psychological maltreatment

Characteristics of Psychologically Maltreated Children

- Increases with the age of the child
- Not clear whether there are gender differences—some research says that girls are subject to more; some research says no difference in the rates between girls and boys
- Ethnic/racial background—more likely to be “other” ethnicity/race; maybe these children are bi-racial...

Characteristics of Psychologically Maltreating Parents

- Biological parents are primary perpetrators
- Females more likely to be perpetrators of emotional neglect; males more likely to be perpetrators of emotional abuse
- Single (vs. married or living with someone)
- More interpersonal problems
- More psychiatric symptoms (e.g., depression, hostility, aggression; substance abuse)
- More likely to have been emotionally abused by their own parents

Consequences of Child Psychological Maltreatment

- Short term effects
 - Interpersonal maladjustment
 - Intellectual deficits—especially strong finding in the literature
 - Affective behavioral problems
- Long term effects
 - Compared to other types of maltreatment, psych maltreatment has the strongest effects on later psychological functioning

Interventions for Psychologically Maltreated Children

- Because of the wide-range of behaviors that define psychological maltreatment, it is unlikely that one treatment will work well for all children
- Currently no evaluations of programs that *specifically* target psychological maltreatment

Interventions for Insensitive Parenting

- Most of these interventions are based on attachment theory
- **What is attachment theory?**
 - A baby is dependent, physically and psychologically, on the mother during the early months of life
 - The mother's ability to anticipate her infant's needs during this time allows the infant to slowly recognize his/her own needs.
 - The baby's experience of the mother's responsiveness to him/her begins to provide a cognitive and emotional template, called an internal working model, of him/herself in relation to others and others in relation to him/herself (Bowlby, 1969/1982).
 - Attachment is a behavioral manifestation of that internal working model.
 - It is measured using the Strange Situation procedure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), typically administered when the child is 12-18 months of age.
 - The Strange Situation involves various periods of separating the child from the mother and introducing a stranger to the child. The procedure creates a mild stress for the child. It is believed that the child's internal working model comes into play most strongly during periods of stress.
 - The Strange Situation is videotaped and then the child's behavior is coded into one of 4 categories

Attachment Theory (con't)

- Children's behaviors can be coded into 4 categories: secure and three types of insecure attachment classifications (avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized).
- **Securely attached** children have confidence in their mother's emotional availability and responsiveness to their needs. After separation, secure children are easily soothed by their mothers and return to play upon being comforted.
- Children with an **avoidant attachment** lack confidence in their mother's responsiveness and expect rejection; thus, they seek little contact with the mother.
- Children with an **ambivalent attachment** classification are unsure about the likelihood of their mothers' responsiveness, presumably because their mothers have been inconsistent in responding to the children's needs in the past.
- Children with **disorganized attachment** lack a coherent strategy for coping with the stress of separation from the mother. Behaviors may include apprehension, contradictory behaviors, or even disorientation and dissociation.
- **Why do we care about what type of attachment a child has?**
 - Because secure attachment has been linked to better psychological health and better adult relationships than the other attachment types

Attachment Theory Interventions

- Back to interventions that try to improve the child's attachment ...
 - They focus on decreasing parental insensitivity, inconsistency, and unresponsiveness
 - They focus on increasing parental nurturance
 - Research shows that these programs do, in fact, improve parenting and subsequently infant attachment security