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## FACT SHEET

# Emotional Abuse

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Emotional abuse is commonly defined as a pattern of behavior that can seriously interfere with a child's positive emotional development. Those patterns of behavior include:

- *constant rejection of the child*
- *terrorizing*
- *refusal to provide basic nurturance*
- *refusal to get help for a child's psychological problems*
- *failure to provide the physical and mental stimulation that a child needs to be able to grow*
- *exposing a child to corruption including drug abuse, criminal behavior, etc.*

According to Douglas Besharov in his book, *Recognizing Child Abuse*, "*emotional abuse is an assault on the child's mind, just as physical abuse is an assault on the child's body*". Children who are constantly shamed, terrorized, humiliated, or rejected suffer at least as much if not more than if they had been physically assaulted. In fact, children who are physically abused also suffer psychologically, although it may be difficult to see that immediate effects.

An infant who is being severely deprived of basic emotional nurturance, even though physically well cared for, can fail to thrive and can eventually die. Less severe forms of early emotional deprivation may produce babies who grow into anxious and insecure children who are slow to develop or might have low self esteem.

Emotional abuse can be very hard to diagnose or even to define. Other types of abuse are usually identifiable because marks or other physical evidence is left. Emotional abuse leaves hidden scars that manifest themselves in numerous behavioral ways. Insecurity, poor self esteem, destructive behavior, angry acts, withdrawal, poor development of basic skills, alcohol or drug abuse, suicide, difficulty in forming relationships, and unstable job histories can all be possible results of emotional maltreatment. Society pays an awful price for these anti-social behaviors.

Because of the difficulty in defining emotional abuse, we must be very careful not to lump all negative parental attitudes and/or actions under the category of emotional maltreatment. Even the best of parents have occasions when they have momentarily "lost control" and said hurtful things to their children, ignored them during a time when attention needs are critical, or unintentionally scared them. What is truly harmful according to James Garbarino, Executive Director of the Erickson Institute in Chicago, is "*the chronic pattern that erodes and corrodes a child...that persistent, chronic behavior toward a child*". It is important to understand that emotional abuse is not just an isolated incident. Dr. Arthur Green, Director of the Family Center at the Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City says "*we're talking about the kind of things that a good mother may do 10% of the time, but a troubled mother does 90% of the time*".

Children need acceptance, love, encouragement, discipline, consistent, and positive attention. Emotionally abused children grow up thinking that they are deficient in some way and the ultimate tragedy of this kind of abuse is that when these children become parents, they are most likely to continue the cycle of emotionally abusing their children.

*There are ways to begin breaking the cycle of emotional abuse. Here are just ten suggestions that might be useful:*

1. *Count to 10 before reacting by screaming when a child misbehaves.*
2. *Remind yourself that you can handle things. Visualize yourself responding in a calm way so you're not shouting.*
3. *Words like stupid, dummy, clumsy, lazy, or other negative labels have no place when dealing with a child.*
4. *Take a parenting class or join a parent's support group.*
5. *Learn can about the development stages of your child. Share your common experiences with other parents.*
6. *Learn how to reason. You may have to learn how to use age appropriate words that are understandable to a child.*
7. *Be open to suggestions. Try not to get defensive about alternative suggestions on how to raise your children.*
8. *Use time-out. Time-out should equal 1 minute for each year of the age. When it is over, it is important to discuss the reasons why they were placed in time-out so that they can learn the cause and effect of their behavior.*
9. *Treat your children like you would your friends or neighbors.*
10. *If you say something that is harmful or hurtful don't be afraid to apologize. It won't show weakness or uncertainty.*



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