

Childhood Emotional Abuse

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It is both the most pervasive and the least understood form of abuse among children. It can come from parents, teachers, coaches, ministers, and others. The wounds from it are often hidden from sight. It is fueled by some popular television shows and movies which promote demeaning language as an "entertaining" form of communication. Some adults even minimize its potential for harm and believe that its victims will "get over it" when they grow up. The culprit is the emotional abuse of children.

What is emotional abuse? It is defined as any episode in which a child is made to feel worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, or endangered. It can include verbal abuse, unwarranted criticism, or more subtle tactics like intimidation, manipulation, and indifference. The abuse may be intentional or subconscious, but it is almost always a pattern of conduct rather than a single event. If left unchecked, the results of emotional abuse in the life of a child can be devastating.

What are the causes of emotional abuse? Most emotional abuse occurs for many of the same reasons that physical abuse occurs. Parents and other adults are vulnerable to becoming abusers when they struggle with personal crises such as unemployment, poverty, divorce, illness, death, drug abuse, alcoholism, or depression. The child is an easy target for the release of frustration experienced during these times of stress. Emotional abuse is also the result of a vicious history of abuse in many families. Adults who were abused as children often become perpetrators themselves, believing that this is the way children should be controlled.

What does emotional abuse look like? Researchers have now identified several different types of emotional abuse.

Terrorizing - This type of emotional abuse is characterized by episodes of berating, belittling, criticizing, name calling, screaming, threatening, excessive blaming, sarcasm, and humiliation. The child lives in constant fear of what is going to happen next.

Rejecting - Adults who lack the ability to bond with others will often display rejecting behavior toward a child. They tell a child, in a variety of ways, that he or she is unwanted. The adult may also tell the child to leave or that they are going to send the child away or abandon the child. The child may also become the scapegoat, being blamed for all the family's problems.

Ignoring - This type of emotional abuse often comes from parents who have had few of their own emotional needs met and are unable to respond to the needs of their children. They fail to understand the importance of nurture in the life of a child. When the child is in crisis and in need of emotional support themselves, the parent is physically present but emotionally absent.

Isolating - Children who are abused through isolation are not allowed to engage in appropriate activities with peers. Parents may require the child to stay in the house from the time school ends until the next morning. The child may also be isolated from other family members and family activities.

Demanding - Demanding abuse places unrealistic expectations on the child. Parents and other adults often demand near perfection in academics, sports, or other activities. In a few cases the adult desires constant personal attention and no matter what the child does for the adult, it is never enough. In either case, the child is forced to live with constant criticism.

What are the results of emotional abuse? Like more violent forms of abuse, emotional abuse can impair a child's self-image and self-esteem. The child may have difficulty making friends and relating to peers. These children may actually avoid situations in which they are required to give and receive affection. A child may exhibit aggressive and oppositional behaviors and may also develop learning difficulties or hyperactivity. Some children experiencing emotional abuse express themselves with a pseudo-maturity because they have become a caretaker for an adult parent who relies on the child to meet their needs. In extreme cases, the child can become self-destructive, engaging in self-mutilation and even attempting suicide.

When this emotional abuse occurs over an extended period of time, it can have a lifelong impact. Adults who are victims of emotional abuse during childhood often take responsibility for problems but never successes, and judge themselves without mercy. They may constantly seek approval and affirmation but may have difficulty with intimacy, security, trust, and commitment in our relationships. They may also be so programmed to believe that they are going to fail that they belittle and humiliate themselves before someone else has that opportunity.

What can be done to prevent emotional abuse and to aid those children who have been abused? The church can be that support system families need to deal with stress. Pastors, teachers, and other church members can serve as models for healthy parent-child relationships. The church can provide parenting courses, family support groups, or a parent mentoring program. The church can also refer families in need to competent Christian counselors. Ultimately, a close, personal relationship with Christ will provide adults and children with the power to prevent and overcome emotional abuse.

Relationships broken or damaged from emotional abuse can be restored. Children of all ages can be healed, and God can use our healthy families to help others facing the threat of emotional abuse. God's Word is clear. Children are a gift from Him. They are precious to God and must be precious to us. Parents are not to provoke children, but are to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. May our children see Christ and His love in us every day.