Emotional abuse and neglect (psychological maltreatment): a conceptual framework

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Abstract

Objective: Emotional abuse and neglect is an under-recognized, but actually common, form of child abuse. Professionals in the field continue to find difficulty in recognizing and operationally defining it, and experience uncertainty about proving it legally. There are also questions about intervention and therapy to protect the child in the least detrimental manner. These difficulties have led to delays in recognition and protective intervention. Emotional abuse and neglect are defined as a carer-child relationship that is characterized by patterns of harmful interactions, requiring no physical contact with the child. Motivation to harm the child is not necessary for the definition. Unlike sexual abuse that is a secret activity, these forms of ill treatment are easily observable. The child’s development is impaired in all domains of functioning but, not being specific to emotional abuse and neglect, cannot be regarded as diagnostic.

Method: Research, clinical experience and theoretical considerations have led to a conceptual framework and operational definitions of five categories of harmful interactions between parent and child. This framework is contrasted with the APSAC categories.

Results: It is postulated that the different categories of ill treatment respectively require different therapeutic interventions.

Conclusion: Concerns about the presence of emotional abuse need to trigger an assessment process that includes identifying the nature of the abusive or neglectful interactions and a time-limited trial of specific interventions. The family’s response to this process and its outcome will determine the need for statutory involvement, as well as providing a basis for litigation if this is required. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Psychological maltreatment; Emotional abuse and neglect; Definitions
Introduction

This article explores the place of emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment within the overall context of child abuse and neglect. It revisits definitional issues and briefly considers professional intervention. The focus in this article is on the relationship between the primary caregiver(s) and the child. It needs to be acknowledged that this relationship is invariably nested within the family which is, in turn, significantly influenced by the social environment in which the family is located, and influenced by family members’ own histories.

In considering child abuse and neglect in general, and psychological maltreatment in particular, a central premise is that responsibility for ensuring that the relationship between the parent and the child is nonabusive or neglectful lies with the parent. Children can be temperamentally difficult, provocative or, in some cases, have physical or psychological conditions that cause serious stress for the parent and challenge their ability to cope. However, if the parents are unable to cope, responsible action is to seek help. If the parents, for whatever reason, are unable to seek help, the responsibility lies with others to intervene on behalf of both the child and the parent.

It is now increasingly accepted that emotional abuse and neglect cause significant harm to the child’s development and that this harm extends into adult life (Hart, Binggeli, & Brassard, 1998). Evidence for this has come from a number of follow-up and longitudinal studies which consistently show that emotional abuse and neglect in childhood are associated significantly with a wide range of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive difficulties in later childhood (Erickson, Egeland, & Pianta, 1989), adolescence (Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, Egolf, & Wu, 1991; Skuse et al., 1998), and adulthood (Briere & Runtz, 1990; Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1996). However, in these studies, emotional abuse has either been inferred from descriptions of parent-child interactions, or different operational definitions of the actual term have been used in the various studies.

O’Hagan (1995) has suggested that emotional and psychological abuse are usefully distinguished from each other. Psychological abuse is defined as impeding the mental (especially cognitive) and moral faculties. This distinction is not considered to be useful since cognition and emotion are not independent of each other, cognitive appraisal of experiences contributing to the affective experience and vice versa.

The place of psychological maltreatment in the overall context of child abuse & neglect

Not infrequently, different forms of child abuse and neglect coexist (Briere & Runtz, 1988; Ney, Fung, & Wickett, 1994). In one study, psychological maltreatment, measured separately, was found in a majority (90%) of children who had also been physically abused and neglected (Claussen & Crittenden, 1991). Moreover, they found that the psychological maltreatment was more strongly predictive of subsequent impairments in the children’s development than the severity of physical abuse. Beyond the physical injury that can result from the various forms of child abuse and neglect, most of the sequelae of all forms of abuse
and neglect affect the child’s psychological, emotional, and behavioral development. It may indeed be the attendant emotional abuse and neglect which are the mediators of the harm caused by other forms of child abuse and neglect (Hart, Brassard, & Karlson, 1996; Sanders & Becker-Lausen, 1995).

Importantly, emotional abuse and neglect also exist independently of other forms of abuse and neglect. While, for instance, physical neglect is often accompanied by psychological neglect, the converse is not always the case (Egeland & Erickson, 1987). Several factors distinguish emotional abuse and neglect, or psychological maltreatment from other forms of child abuse and neglect. Table 1 summarizes some of the differences.

There are many similarities between emotional abuse and neglect and physical neglect. The latter include failure to provide and lack of supervision (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993), which address basic (survival) needs (Maslow, 1948).

### Epidemiology

It is invariably stated in publications on the subject that emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment are difficult to define and, therefore, to recognize reliably. In the US, states differ in the inclusion or not of emotional abuse under their civil, criminal, and vicarious liability statutes, and there is considerable variation between different states in their rates of evaluation and reporting of emotional abuse (Hamarman, Pope, & Czaja, 2001). US national statistics indicate a rate of 6% out of 984,000 children with substantiated abuse and neglect in 1997 (US Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, 1999).

In England, children’s names are placed on Child Protection Registers under one or more of the categories of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse, when they are deemed to be in (continued) need of protection. The register is not a record of all children who are known to have been abused or neglected. The number of children registered under the category of Emotional Abuse has been steadily increasing over recent years. On March 31, 2000, children in England on the register under the category “Emotional abuse alone” represented 18% of the total number of children on the register for all categories (Government Statistical Service, 2000). In 1997, the Department of Health’s annual publication, “Children and Young People on Child Protection Registers” (Government Statistical Service, 2000),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sexual abuse</th>
<th>Physical abuse</th>
<th>Emotional abuse/neglect</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abusive act/interaction</td>
<td>Hidden</td>
<td>Hidden or observed</td>
<td>Observable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity of abuser</td>
<td>Usually questioned</td>
<td>Sometimes known</td>
<td>Known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuser &amp; primary carer</td>
<td>Usually different</td>
<td>Same or different</td>
<td>Same person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition/proof reliant on evidence of Ill-treatment</td>
<td>Signs of harm to the child</td>
<td>Ill-treatment by caregiver and signs of harm to the child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediate protection indicated</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Usually</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1997), permitted joint registration of emotional abuse with other categories when emotional abuse was thought to be of equal importance, and invited resubmission of figures. The rate for registration of emotional abuse rose to 24% in the resubmitted registrations.

Both in the US and in England, it is thought that the number of children recognized as emotionally abused, and therefore in need of protection and support, is an underestimate. Most children who are physically abused or neglected are not considered as emotionally abused. Claussen and Crittenden (1991) found that psychological maltreatment not accompanying physical abuse and neglect was commoner in a nonreported sample. Glaser and Prior (1997) found in an English sample known to social services for many years that there was considerable delay in recognition of emotional abuse and neglect.

**Reasons for under-recognition and delay in intervention**

Beyond the stated difficulty in operationally defining emotional abuse, there are further possible reasons for the delayed and under-reporting of emotional abuse and neglect. The terms *abuse* and *maltreatment* are considered by some to be unnecessarily pejorative and problematic when applied to emotional abuse and neglect. This is especially so in those cases where there is no clear intent to harm the child, although the interaction is clearly harmful to the child. There is a linguistic and conceptual dilemma between a wish and need to protect children from harm, and a reluctance to label or blame caregivers who hold a primary role and responsibility in the child’s life. This is despite the fact that the parent is, possibly inadvertently, instrumental or causal in the harm to the child. This reluctance to use the term abuse leads to under-recognition. However, the importance of using the terms abuse-neglect or maltreatment is that, in practice, these terms embody a professional imperative to intervene to achieve protection and improve the lot of the child. There is currently no alternative and more acceptable term to encompass this notion.

Unlike sexual abuse and physical abuse, in emotional abuse and neglect the “abuser” is almost invariably the primary carer and attachment figure for the child. In two-parent families, either both parents contribute to the abuse or the nonmaltreating parent is unable to offer effective protection. There is, therefore, concern that if protection requires separation of the child from the abusive situation, this is invariably at the cost of interrupting an attachment bond, even if an insecure one. If recognized early, there is, however, the possibility of therapeutic intervention without removing the child. A further difficulty in justifying intervention is the fact that in most cases, the maltreatment does not cause physical harm to the child.

It may also be that the perceived prospect, especially in the US, of having to defend one’s professional assessment and opinion in a criminal court has acted as a deterrent to pursuing actively the recognition of this form of child maltreatment. This is despite the fact that most cases are heard in juvenile or family (civil) courts. The criminal law, which requires a higher standard of proof, is concerned with the guilt or innocence of the alleged abuser, rather than with the protection of the child victim. It need not be the primary focus for professionals whose task it is to protect children.

There is a continuum within the parent-child relationship, ranging from a good through maladaptive to a sufficiently damaging relationship to merit being termed abusive. As
McGee and Wolfe (1991) state, a threshold is therefore set arbitrarily. Despite the stated difficulty in defining emotional abuse and neglect, empirical studies have shown that both lay and professional persons are able to recognize emotionally abusive interactions. For instance, using 20 vignettes of adult behaviors towards children, Burnett (1993) found that a group of 381 citizens and 452 social work professionals identified the same 9 vignettes as psychological abuse. Schaefer (1997) has reported 80% agreement between mental health professionals and parents about the definition of 10 categories of verbal behavior as “never acceptable.” In a neighborhood sample with two different US ethno-cultural groups, 42% respondents cited emotional/verbal maltreatment as examples of child abuse (Korbin, Coulton, Lindstrom-Ufuti, & Spilsbury, 2000). Also in this study, by comparison only 11% to 19% of the examples that the respondents gave depicted sexual abuse. These studies suggest that the difficulties in recognition cited by professionals, and which may lead to delay, may not always be shared by the lay public.

The harmful consequences of delayed recognition are that children are exposed to more prolonged abuse and neglect, and that interactional patterns become entrenched and more difficult to change. There appears to be a need to refine further the operational definitions and means of recognizing emotional abuse and neglect. This article continues with this endeavor.

**Definitions**

*Ill treatment by the parents or impairment of the child’s health and development?*

There has been considerable debate about whether the definition of emotional abuse and neglect should refer to the maltreating behavior or to the consequences for the child, and whether evidence of both is required for its recognition. The cumulative conclusion in an issue of the journal *Development and Psychopathology* (1991), devoted to the discussion of emotional abuse and neglect, was that, for definitional purposes, evidence of the ill treatment rather than harm to the child should be sought (see also Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). As discussed later, many difficulties and impairments of their health and development are found in children who have been emotionally abused or neglected. However, when the starting point is impairment in the child’s functioning, there may be explanations for this other than emotional abuse and neglect. Moreover, a definition that relies on the presence of ill effects does not allow for the possibility of effective prevention of harm. However, in the US, many states require evidence of harm to the child for case substantiation to occur.

Under the English civil Children Act 1989, the child’s interests are paramount, and the term Significant Harm replaces child abuse and neglect. Significant Harm is defined as “Ill treatment (author’s italics) including sexual abuse and forms of ill treatment which are not physical and/or impairment of the child’s physical or mental health, or physical, intellectual, emotional, social, or behavioral development. The harm or likelihood of harm is attributable to (1) the care given to the child, or likely to be given to him. . . not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give to him; or (2) the child’s being beyond parental control. Significant Harm is the threshold criterion above which child abuse and neglect require statutory child protective services (but not necessarily Court) involvement.” There is no
requirement to prove parental or the abuser’s intent to harm the child to satisfy the threshold. Thus, the fact that cause and effect do not need to be proven beyond likelihood or attribution empowers and enables professionals to begin to intervene and allows children to be more readily protected. Actual civil legal involvement need only be invoked if child protective and therapeutic services, working in partnership with families towards change, are unable to bring about protection of the child.

An overall definition of emotional abuse and neglect

The following criteria constitute and should be met for an overall definition of emotional (or psychological) abuse and neglect:

- Emotional abuse and neglect describes a relationship between the parent and the child (rather than an event or a series of repeated events occurring within the parent-child relationship);
- The interactions of concern pervade or characterize the relationship (at the time);
- The interactions are actually or potentially harmful by causing impairment to the child’s psychological/emotional health and development;
- Emotional abuse and neglect includes omission as well as commission; and
- Emotional abuse and neglect requires no physical contact.

There are many different parental behaviors and parent-child interactions that are expressions of emotional abuse and neglect. However, it is impracticable to construct an exhaustive list of them and to base a definition on them. A conceptual framework is called for.

APSAC framework

In one of their practice guidelines, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, 1995) states that “Psychological maltreatment means a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or of value only in meeting another’s needs.” The guidelines go on to describe six forms of psychological maltreatment:

- Spurning (verbal and non verbal hostile rejecting/degrading);
- Terrorizing (behavior that threatens or is likely to harm physically the child or place the child or the child’s loved objects in danger);
- Exploiting/corrupting (encouraging the child to develop inappropriate behaviors);
- Denying emotional responsiveness (ignoring child’s needs to interact, failing to express positive affect to the child, showing no emotion in interactions with the child);
- Isolating (denying child opportunities for interacting/communicating with peers or adults); and
- Mental, health, medical, and educational neglect (ignoring or failing to ensure provision for the child’s needs).

Several of the overall forms constitute actual behaviors. There are lists of behaviors which are included within each of the six forms of maltreatment (Hart & Brassard, 1986, 1991).
However, there are certain difficulties inherent in these definitions. First, the theoretical or conceptual basis for these forms of maltreatment is not evident. Second, as McGee and Wolfe (1991) pointed out, several of the overall forms may be classified simultaneously. Third, while many of the behaviors listed are clear examples of the overall form of maltreatment, others do not clearly relate to the overall form. For example, “restricting or interfering with cognitive development” is subsumed under exploiting/corrupting; “placing a child in unpredictable or chaotic circumstances” is subsumed under terrorizing.

An alternative framework

An alternative framework has been developed which is not based on parental behaviors or parent-child interactions. Instead, it categorizes the different forms of emotional abuse and neglect found within the overall definition according to a conceptual framework. This is based on the elements that comprise a child’s psychosocial being. The elements of a child’s being can be stated as follows. A child is:

- A person who exists;
- This child with his or her own attributes;
- A child who, by definition, is vulnerable, dependent, and rapidly developing;
- An individual possessing and experiencing her or his own feelings, thoughts, and perceptions; and
- A social being who will increasingly interact and communicate within her or his own social context.

Each one of these aspects of the child needs to be recognized, respected, and valued by the child’s primary caregivers or parents. The violation of or failure to respect any of these elements of the child’s psychosocial being constitute categories of emotional abuse and neglect (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993).

Categories of emotional abuse and neglect

The following five categories all fall within the overall definition of emotional abuse and neglect (proposed by the author, Glaser, 1993):

1. Emotional unavailability, unresponsiveness, and neglect;
   - Includes parental insensitivity.
   The primary carer(s) are usually preoccupied with their own particular difficulties such as mental ill health (including postnatal depression) and substance abuse, or with, for example, overwhelming work commitments. They are unable or unavailable to respond to the child’s emotional needs, with no provision of an adequate alternative.

2. Negative attributions and misattributions to the child;
   - Hostility towards, denigration and rejection of a child who is perceived as deserving these.
Some children grow to believe in and act out the negative attributions placed upon them.

3. Developmentally inappropriate or inconsistent interactions with the child;
   - Expectations of the child beyond her or his developmental capabilities;
   - Overprotection and limitation of exploration and learning;
   - Exposure to confusing or traumatic events and interactions.

This category contains a number of different interactions including exposure to domestic violence and parental (para)suicide. The parents lack knowledge of age-appropriate caregiving and disciplining practices and child development, often because of their own childhood experiences. Their interactions with their children, while harmful, are thoughtless and misguided rather than intending harm.

4. Failure to recognize or acknowledge the child’s individuality and psychological boundary;
   - Using the child for the fulfillment of the parent’s psychological needs;
   - Inability to distinguish between the child’s reality and the adult’s beliefs and wishes.

Factitious Disorder by Proxy is one variant of this category. Category 4 of emotional abuse is also not infrequently found in the context of custody and contact disputes within parents’ divorce proceedings.

5. Failing to promote the child’s social adaptation;
   - Promoting mis-socialization (including corrupting);
   - Psychological neglect (failure to provide adequate cognitive stimulation and/or opportunities for experiential learning).

This category contains both omission and commission, including isolating children and involving them in criminal activities.

Discussion of the categories

A classification should have both clinical and research applicability. Because each category addresses a different aspect of the child’s existence and needs, and is also determined by different motivations and psychological states of the parents in respect to the child, no two categories would be expected to be found consistently together. However, it is possible, and indeed sometimes the case, that more than one category is recognized as present within a parent-child relationship. When two or more categories coexist, it is possible to determine which is the “driving” one. For example, if categories 1 and 2 are found together, the negativity towards the child would explain the emotional unavailability (category 1), the child being perceived as not deserving emotional responsiveness (category 2), and the parent therefore finding difficulty in extending affection to this child. Category 3, developmentally inappropriate interactions, is often found in association with both categories 1 and 2, but is not then the “driving” category. The significance of determining the “driving” category is both conceptual and relevant for providing specific interventions.
Clinical applications of the categories

One reason postulated for the poor outcome of treatment in cases of psychological maltreatment is the nonspecific nature of interventions (Brassard & Hardy, 1997). We hypothesize, and have found clinical validity for this (Glaser, in preparation), that different therapeutic approaches are required for different categories. For instance, interactions within category 3 are commonly encountered, and the first intervention would be a psycho-educational parenting approach, which combines explanations about child development with guidance on alternative ways of interacting with the child. A positive response by the parents to such a therapeutic approach is not forthcoming when the interactions are, in fact, motivated by negative attributions to the child (category 2), in which the parental expectation is for the child to be remediated rather than the parent’s interaction with the child.

Research applications of the categories

Both inter-rater reliability in rating the categories and the independence of the categories await rigorous testing. Thus far, a high level of agreement has been found in our clinical experience with 60 cases, seen in a multidisciplinary team which has been assessing and treating children and families referred for concerns about emotional abuse and neglect since 1997. The classification is being applied as a research measure in a case note study in progress.

Many parental behaviors and interactions with the child are aspects of psychological maltreatment. The proposed categories offer one way of conceptually grouping these behaviors. It is possible for the same parental behavior to be found in two different categories, depending on the parental motivations and state of mind in respect to the child. An example of this is failing to ensure the child’s school attendance, which could be placed in category 4 or 5, depending on the parental motivation or state of mind in relation to the child’s and the parent’s needs. The latter would be a form of neglect, while in the former, the child would be kept at home as a fulfillment of some aspect of the parent’s needs. A further example is threatening or terrorizing, which could be an expression of hostility towards the child (category 2) or an ill-conceived way of correcting the child’s behavior (category 3).

Recognizing emotional abuse and neglect using this definition & classification

When parent-child interactions that cause professional concern are encountered, the initial question is whether these behaviors or interactions satisfy the criteria for the overall definition of emotional abuse and neglect. To determine this, information from different sources of observation and report is required. All the criteria stated above (page 703) apply to each of these categories (with the exception of “Exposure to traumatic events” which would qualify as emotional abuse even if it occurred on a single occasion). The pervasive nature of psychological maltreatment within the parent-child relationship implies that it will be observable by different reporters and in different settings. Descriptors need to be sought from professionals who have had contact with the family including primary health, social services or child protective services (Kaufman, Jones, Stieglitz, Vitulano, & Mannarino,
1994), and schools. In England, this multiagency information-gathering process has been codified in the Assessment Framework (Government Statistical Service, 2000).

To identify the appropriate category, information is required from interviews with the parents and observations of the parent-child interaction. The question of thresholds will be further discussed below.

The parents and the family

The format of exploratory interviews with the family is one broadly used in diagnostic child mental health practice. However, it is important to ensure that some particular issues are specifically explored:

- What are the family’s concerns in general and about the child in particular?

Some families appear mystified or surprised about being interviewed, not sensing any cause for concern. Others are able and keen to describe their concerns about the child or children. The terms that they use to describe the child and their affect are important indicators of their attitude towards their child. Concerns about other aspects of family life are also important to record.

- Why do the children think they are being seen?

Many children who are emotionally abused believe or “know” that their bad behavior is the cause for concern.

- What are the family’s explanations for the child’s difficulties?

This issue is a very important one. Parents who locate the problem or “fault” in their child, without showing a capacity to reflect about other contributing factors, are characteristic of those falling into category 2 (negative attribution and blaming or denigration of the child).

- What remedies have been tried?

It is important to know what the family members have tried and whom they have consulted previously, for two reasons. Firstly, therapeutic endeavors in psychological maltreatment are difficult to implement and unlikely to succeed if previously tried. Secondly, the descriptions that some parents give of their attempts to deal with their child may include aspects of unequivocal psychological maltreatment.

- What help is the family requesting?

Parents who request help for themselves in finding better and more appropriate ways of dealing with their child’s difficulties, as well as requesting direct help for the child, are less likely to be found to be emotionally abusive or neglectful. In psychological maltreatment, typically the request is for the child to be treated or “sorted out,” or for no help to be sought. Some parents request the temporary removal of the child into foster care or hospital, to be diagnosed and treated, and to be returned to the family after the child has undergone necessary changes, or respite has been gained by the family. If the child is removed and does not show the same difficulties in a different environment, the parents find this difficult to tolerate and castigate the child further, often demanding that the child is returned to their care.
Cultural issues

In view of varying childrearing practices, questions are not infrequently asked about the cultural applicability of categories of emotional abuse and neglect. From personal experience of discussing these categories in detail with professionals in many different cultures and continents (including South East Asia, Australia, South America, and South Africa), it appears that the overall categories are universally applicable, although there is some variation in parental behaviors and interactions applicable within the categories. For instance, there are variations between different cultures in what is regarded as developmentally appropriate for a child.

Emotional abuse is sometimes suspected in a family of a minority ethnic group. One way of testing the cultural applicability of interactions that are deemed emotionally abusive by the host/majority culture is to turn the interaction of concern into a vignette. This can be presented to appropriate members of the ethnic minority group for their opinion about its acceptability, or not, within their culture.

In practice, in most families where emotional abuse or neglect are suspected, the child shows significant impairments which are objectively measurable. In the absence of alternative explanations for the child’s difficulties, and in the presence of parent-child interactions that fall within categories of psychological maltreatment, this can at the least be hypothesized to be the explanation. Cultural practices may not be benign and culturally sanctioned, and culturally normative practices may affect adversely the well-being of children (McKee, 1984).

Relationship between these and the APSAC categories

There are clearly many similarities and some overlaps between the categories outlined above and the forms of psychological maltreatment described in the APSAC guidelines. Table 2 illustrates the relationship between the two systems. There is close equivalence between some of our categories and the APSAC forms. However, without knowing more about the parents and family interactions, it is theoretically possible for APSAC forms of emotional abuse to be placed in one of several of our categories.

The APSAC forms of spurning and denying emotional responsiveness correspond respectively to our categories 2 and 1. However, emotional responsiveness may be actively denied to a child who is perceived as not deserving this. There are not precise equivalences between the other APSAC forms and the categories suggested here. Although the APSAC terrorizing form would invariably be included in our developmentally inappropriate category 3, many of the parental behaviors described under this APSAC form could also be subsumed under our hostility category 2. Moreover, sometimes, terrorizing and threatening parental behaviors are motivated by sadism, in which case such behavior is fulfilling the parent’s psychological needs, thus falling into our category 4. Category 3 also includes overprotection and other developmentally inappropriate and dysfunctional modes of parenting which do not amount to terrorizing. The APSAC exploiting form contains elements of both our category 4 (failure to recognize or acknowledge the child’s individuality and psychological boundary) and the failure to promote socialization category 5. The APSAC isolating form is another aspect of this category, but could also be an aspect of our categories 2 or indeed 3 or 4, depending on
the parental motivations. The APSAC medical neglect is, in England, subsumed under neglect (lack of provision).

We conclude that these differences arise out of different starting points. The APSAC forms describe parental behaviors towards the child. It is important to note, however, that while developed independently (Glaser, 1993), the two systems capture between them the same aspects of concern about the parent-child interaction. Because of the similarities between the behaviors included in the two respective systems, and for clinical and research utilization which would ultimately benefit the children, it would be desirable to reconcile the two systems. One form of reconciliation is presented in Table 3.

**Thresholds and severity**

The issue of a threshold is often cited as a difficult one. If the parental behavior and parent-child interactions satisfy the definitional criteria, then the threshold of emotional
abuse and neglect is reached. Pervasiveness is evidenced by descriptions that include terms such as “always,” “usually,” or “often,” and which are observed at different times and in different settings. The difficulty with the threshold arises less in setting it than with the implications of accepting that it has been reached. In countries such as the US where there is mandatory reporting of maltreatment, the implications of recognizing abuse are perceived as more interventionist and potentially punitive than in jurisdictions where child protection is considered seriously but with more flexibility in protective responses, such as in England. The need to intervene, but in a nonpunitive manner, is especially relevant because many of the parents have, in their past, been maltreated.

From the child’s point of view, it is the assessment of severity rather than the establishment of the threshold which is more relevant. An assessment of severity must include the effect on the child which is the resultant of factors related to the child and the abuse suffered. Protective child factors include the child’s innate ability and the availability to the child of a relationship with a trusted adult. Such a relationship will not necessarily be an attachment. The child’s resilience is also dependent on the child’s self-esteem which is, however, itself determined in part by previous good experiences. There is a complex relationship between the age of the child and the severity of the effect of maltreatment on the child. This is, in part, mediated by the duration of the abuse. Attachment relationships and the security or insecurity of attachment are established in infancy and early childhood, and emotional abuse and neglect have a significant negative influence on the nature of the attachments formed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of maltreatment</th>
<th>Proposed changes to APSAC system</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional unavailability, unresponsiveness and neglect</td>
<td>Denying emotional responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Omit word ‘denying’ and describe as unresponsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative attributions and misattributions to the child</td>
<td>Spurning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(no changes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmentally inappropriate or inconsistent interactions with the child</td>
<td>Add this category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to recognise or acknowledge the child’s individuality and psychological boundary</td>
<td>Separate exploiting from corrupting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using the child for the fulfilment of the parent’s psychological needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing to promote the child’s social adaptation</td>
<td>Separate corrupting from exploiting</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Omit Terrorizing as an overall form</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Omit Isolating as an overall form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Omit Mental health, medical &amp; educational neglect as an overall form</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Therefore, early onset is likely to increase severity, as well as to be associated with longer overall duration, unless early effective intervention is offered. Conversely, later onset suggests the possibility of previously established secure attachments and shorter duration of the maltreatment. However, recognition in later childhood is not synonymous with late onset and often merely indicates prolonged duration and late recognition (Glaser & Prior, 1997). The severity of the abuse determines the urgency of intervention.

**Consequences**

**Effects on the child**

The cumulative list of difficulties found in children subjected to emotional abuse and neglect reads like the index of a child psychiatric textbook. In a study of 94 children from 56 families whose names had been placed on the Child Protection Register under the category of Emotional Abuse, we found the following difficulties with which the children presented (Glaser, Prior, & Lynch, 2001). They are listed in Table 4 (missing data on 5 children). It is clear from the table that the children suffered from more than one form of impairment.
While the effects on the children are not of definitional use, they are clearly of central importance and, indeed, constitute the basis for concern. Evidence of harm to the child is not a prerequisite for recognizing psychological maltreatment, but in practice it is far more difficult to instigate, especially mandated, intervention when harm is not evident. This is of particular importance since, as Brassard and Hardy (1997) comment, these families are very difficult to engage in therapeutic work towards change that would therefore need to await the prior damage to the child’s development. Preventive steps are thus difficult to institute.

**Relationship between forms of maltreatment and harm to the child**

There is as yet no reliable information about the relative severity of effect of each of the different categories of maltreatment or about the specific impairments resulting from the different categories. It is not at present clear whether the nature of the impairment of the child’s functioning is determined by the parental behavior or by the meaning of this behavior as denoted by the particular category of emotional abuse and neglect within which the parental behavior is located. However, psychological neglect (category 1), especially in the first 2 years of life, has been found to be associated with very significant later difficulties including social withdrawal, angry noncompliant behavior, and lower academic achievement (Erickson & Egeland, 1996). Hostility and rejection affect the child’s self view and result in negative and hostile social interaction by the child with others. Hostility and rejection are also associated with depression and other internalizing problems in the child, particularly in girls (McGee, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1997). Exposure to traumatic events and interactions may result in post-traumatic stress disorder (Graham-Berman & Levendovsky, 1998). There is no empirical evidence to support the intuitive assumption that the more categories of abuse are operating, the more severe is the effect of the maltreatment.

**Conclusions**

Emotional abuse and neglect will continue to pose a challenge to professionals concerned with ensuring the well-being of children. When finding oneself involved in a case of psychological maltreatment, it is helpful to ask at what stage of the process one is:

- Is there suspicion of abuse which requires verification?
- Is this an assessment of the extent of harm to the child?
- Is this a time-limited trial for change?
- Is one in the process of preparing a case for moving the child to an alternative, possibly permanent, family?
- Is this damage limitation for a child who will remain within their family?

A great deal more research is required to further the clinical usefulness of these concepts. For example, the relationship between forms of maltreatment and nature of harm to the child requires careful study. There is a need to develop further assessment instruments and to develop and test specific treatment interventions.
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Résumé

**Objectif:** Sévices et négligence psychologiques constituent une forme pas assez reconnue mais vraiment répandue de mauvais traitements à l‘égard des enfants. Les professionnels qui exercent dans ce champ continuent à trouver difficile de les identifier et de les définir de façon opérationnelle et ils

Les sévices et la négligence psychologiques sont définis comme un type de relation entre l’enfant et celui qui en a la garde caractérisé par un mode d’interaction nocif mais ne nécessitant pas de contact physique. Il n’est pas nécessaire qu’il y ait désir de faire du mal à l’enfant. Contrairement aux abus sexuels qui constituent une activité secrète, ces formes de mauvais traitement sont facilement observables. Le développement de l’enfant est mis à mal dans tous les domaines de son fonctionnement mais ceci n’étant pas particulier aux sévices et à la négligence psychologiques n’a pas de valeur pour établir un diagnostic.

Méthode: La recherche, l’expérience clinique et les considérations théoriques ont conduit à un cadre conceptuel et à des définitions opérationnelles de cinq catégories d’interactions nocives entre le parent et l’enfant. Ce cadre est en contraste avec les catégories APSAC.

Résultats: Il est postulé que les différentes catégories de mauvais traitements nécessitent chacune des interventions thérapeutiques différentes.

Conclusions: Des inquiétudes concernant la présence de sévices psychologiques imposent de déclencher une procédure d’évaluation qui inclura l’identification de la nature des interactions amenant à maltraiter ou à négliger l’enfant et, pour un temps limité un essai d’interventions spécifiques. La réaction de la famille à cette procédure et son résultat déterminera la nécessité d’une intervention judiciaire, tout comme cela fournira une base pour le procès si celui-ci est exigé.

Resumen

Objetivo: El maltrato y la negligencia emocional son formas de maltrato infantil infra-recogidos, pero frecuentemente comunes. Los profesionales de esta área continúan encontrando difícil el reconocer y definirlo operativamente, y experimentan incertidumbres a la hora de verificarlo legalmente. También hay cuestiones acerca de la intervención y la terapia para proteger al niño con el menor detrimento posible. Estas dificultades han provocado retrasos en el reconocimiento del problema y en la intervención de protección.

El maltrato y la negligencia emocional son definidos como una relación cuidador-niño que se caracteriza por patrones de interacciones dañinas, que no requieren contacto físico con el niño. Tampoco es necesaria para su definición el que se dé una motivación de dañar al niño. A diferencia del abuso sexual, que es una actividad secreta, estas formas de maltrato son fácilmente observables. El desarrollo del niño es dañado en todos los ámbitos de funcionamiento pero, no siendo específico con el maltrato y negligencia emocional, no se puede estimar como diagnóstico.

Méthodo: La investigación, la experiencia clínica y las consideraciones teóricas conducen a un modelo conceptual y a definiciones operativas de cinco categorías de interacciones dañinas entre padre e hijo. Este modelo es contrastado con las categorías de APSAC.

Resultados: Se postula que las diferentes categorías de maltrato requieren respectivamente diferentes intervenciones terapéuticas.

Conclusiones: Las preocupaciones sobre la presencia de maltrato emocional necesitan provocar un proceso de evaluación que incluya identificar la naturaleza de las interacciones maltratantes o negligentes y un proceso de intervenciones específicas limitadas en el tiempo. La respuesta de la familia a este proceso y sus resultados determinarán la necesidad de implicación de la administración, al igual que dotarán de una base de litigación en caso de que sea necesario.