Understanding child emotional abuse

Words can harm - emotional abuse can be just as hurtful as physical abuse and the effects can last a lifetime.

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse happens when a child is repeatedly made to feel worthless, unloved, alone or scared.

- Also known as psychological or verbal abuse, it is the most common form of child abuse.
- It can include constant rejection, hostility, teasing, bullying, yelling, criticism and exposure to family violence.
- The impacts of emotional abuse are just as harmful as physical abuse.

Emotional abuse is particularly damaging to a child's self-esteem and emotional wellbeing.

Types of emotional abuse

Typically, repeated incidents of abuse build up over time and cause lasting effects upon a child's development and wellbeing. However a single incident can cause serious harm as well.

Some examples of emotional abuse include:

Continually ignoring or rejecting a child

Physically or socially isolating a child

Forcing a child to do things by scaring them

Exposing a child to domestic violence

Constantly criticising, humiliating or blaming a child

Constantly swearing, yelling or screaming at a child

Making a child feel different from other family members

Telling a child that they're worthless, unloved or not enough

Withholding love, support, praise or attention from a child

Bullying, teasing, insulting or belittling a child

Having unrealistic expectations or unreasonable demands of a child

Not allowing a child to explore, express themselves, learn or make friends

Treating a child badly because of things they can't change (eg. disability, gender, sexuality)

Threatening abuse or threats to harm loved ones or pets

Possible signs of emotional abuse

Signs that a child might be experiencing emotional abuse can include:

- Avoiding or running away from home
- Low self-image, self-esteem and confidence
- Delays in development or decline in school work
- Often anxious, distressed or afraid of doing something wrong
- Demanding, disruptive or secretive behaviour
- Extremes of behaviour – very aggressive to very passive
- Trying too hard to please or failure to connect with parents
- Being withdrawn or having difficulty relating to others
- Feels worthless, unloved or unwanted
- Increased fear, guilt and self-blame
- Lying, stealing or lack of trust in adults
- Self-harming or suicidal thoughts
- Drug and alcohol use

Impacts of emotional abuse

Children and young people may experience a range of emotional, psychological and physical problems as a result of being harmed, including:

Unhealthy coping strategies or habits (sucking, biting, rocking, self-harm)

Mental health disorders (anxiety, depression, phobias)

Inability to trust or difficulty forming relationships

Destructive, aggressive or anti-social behaviours

Drug and alcohol use

Developmental delays

Sleep or eating disorders

Difficulty expressing themselves

Learning or speech disorders

High-risk sexual behaviour

Behavioural problems or disorders

Difficulty regulating emotions

Physical disorders or health issues

Suicidal thoughts or attempts

Overly adaptive behaviours (eg. very compliant or defensive)

Low confidence, self-esteem or self-worth

Child protection is everyone's business! Some adults have a legal obligation to notify authorities (these obligations differ between states and territories).

Who else can help?

If you have a reason to suspect a child is experiencing harm, or is at risk of experiencing harm, contact an authority in your State and talk to them about your concerns.

VIC - Department of Human Services

There is support available

We're here to help

Encourage the child in your life to contact Kids Helpline if they need some extra support to cope with what has been happening.

You may find talking to somebody outside of the situation helpful. You could try calling Parentline in your state or territory to discuss your concerns.

For some guidance on responding to disclosures of child abuse, see our article on Responding to disclosures of child abuse.