

## Discussion/Débats

### *Psychological Abuse in the Home and in the School*

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The most devastating of sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit (Erikson, 1968): to assault the ego is to "attack a fundamental component of competent development" (Garbarino & Gilliam, 1981, p. 75). Although results of psychological abuse are not readily visible, indelible scars are left. It is every bit as devastating as physical abuse: often physical abuse is the expression of a broader and more generalized disregard for the child's emotional development. Yet, no clear consensus exists concerning the defining attributes of emotional abuse, no controlling legislation is established, and there are few reported cases.

#### ELEMENTS FOR A DEFINITION

Emotional abuse, like physical abuse, has deep historical roots, perhaps in the enduring children-as-chattels viewpoint; it has never, however, been dealt with in a deliberate fashion. Less obvious than the signs of physical abuse are the indicators of psychological abuse which testify to the dire circumstances surrounding a child's existence: terror, over-compliance, or an aggressive disposition in an environment of humiliation (Lewis, 1982). In some cases, parents are unaware of the impact of remarks and behaviours on a child. But adult rejection, isolation, lying to the child, ignoring, yelling, labelling, fear-inducing techniques, humiliation, badgering, scapegoating, extreme inconsistency, name-calling, the assignment of excessive responsibilities, the absence of affection, unrealistic expectations, and seductive behaviour are associated with psychologically unhealthy parent-child relationships (Nebraska Association of Social Workers, 1977). Whether wittingly or unwittingly, these behaviours on

the part of a parent or a teacher *in loco parentis* are part of child abuse. An emotionally abusive atmosphere fosters "developmental erosion," the blunting of a child's emotions. A "muted interaction," an inability to communicate, a lack of control over one's life, the forfeiture of one's will, and the loss of faith in one's own judgment are the results (Helfer, 1981). In one victim's words,

physical pain is more tangible – one has some control over it; but the emotional is more abstract, more painful. The attack is pointed directly at the soul – how one looks, walks, talks, feels and thinks – all that holds the human being together. Nothing is left untormented. (cited in Lucas, 1982, p. 2)

Defining psychological abuse is not easy (Garbarino & Gilliam, 1981). Emotional abuse is often, but not always, associated with the family environment: rising unemployment, escalating living costs, stress within the family, tension, and frustration are catalysts. In Helfer's (1975) psychodynamic model of physical child abuse, a crisis or series of crises is required for abuse to occur; it might be posited that a "crisis or triggering stimulus" event is more frequent in depressed economies. Unfortunately, scapegoating, the projection of guilt and hostility onto a child, is a frequent outcome, particularly in a family which might be described as marginally stable in the best of economic times. The outlook is not one of rapid improvement. Nor is psychological abuse restricted to the home environment:

It is well known that within the education system teachers can be faced with numbers of pupils and types of exceptional children that exceed the personal resources of certain individual staff members to cope, under particular classroom conditions. With some individuals it is indeed not a matter of remaining professionally effective and creative, but actually of surviving in the classroom and being able to cope with each day. (Hembling, 1980, p. 30)

But the problem need not be so severe. Martin presents student perceptions of teachers' attitudes toward them, criteria teachers use in categorizing students, and the nature of favours and mistreatment in the classroom. A Grade 11 girl observed that "those who are picked on constantly feel disliked" (1982, p. 52). One Grade 9 girl expressed her feelings this way: "I think that teachers should not be allowed to treat some students better than the next because it will make the other students feel like a speck of dirt in under that teacher's feet" (1982, p. 52). And a Grade 10 girl explained: "I think it is wrong that teachers sometimes put students down or punish them to boost their own egos. Not many teachers do this, but teachers who do seem to do it to the same person every time and I don't think that's fair" (1982, p. 64).

Many students perceive psychologically abusive treatment in their learning environment. Academic failure, disciplinary problems, and even the dropout phenomenon cannot be fully explained through community factors, socioeconomic background, or characteristics of students such as intelligence, motivation, and aspiration. We must examine the sociological dimensions of the teaching-learning process, including student interpretations of the actions of their teachers.

#### A TENTATIVE DEFINITION

The Manitoba Working Group on the Emotional Abuse of Children adopted this working definition:

Emotional child abuse is the damaging, by whatever means, of a child's self-image by an adult responsible for the child's nurturing or learning, resulting in a decrease in the child's feeling of personal worth and therein his ability to love, to trust, and to feel at one with the human race. (1981, p. 4)

Deprivation of the developmentally requisite nurturing relationship is a key aspect of this definition. The opportunity to form a meaningful affect bond is known to be central to healthy psychological development (Goldfarb, 1945). In terms of the working definition, the teacher is an important "adult responsible for the child's nurturing or learning" and the nature of the teacher's interaction must be carefully examined.

This early mothering process, often referred to as "bonding," is deemed a necessity for normal growth. The implications for prevention of child abuse are obvious, and it is vital that mothering be continued throughout childhood. Lack of nurturing in early years is damaging, and if it is compounded by verbal abuse, the child can suffer greatly. (Ontario Ministry, 1979, p. 4)

Because, as a general statement, Canadian courts are ill prepared to define or deal with emotional abuse, the following in-process legal definition was suggested for inclusion in the Child Welfare Act of Manitoba.

Emotional abuse means acts of commission or omission on the part of the parent or the person in whose charge a child is, including an unwillingness or inability to provide appropriate care, control, affection, or stimulation for the child, or the making of inappropriate demands upon the child, which has a tendency to produce emotional disability of a permanent nature. This emotional disability includes, but is not necessarily restricted to:

1. failure to thrive
2. developmental retardation

3. serious anxiety, depression or withdrawal
4. serious behavioral disturbances
5. blunting of intellectual potential
6. signs and symptoms of emotional deprivation. (Legislative Committee, 1981, p. 1)

Terms such as "best interests of the child" and the child's "emotional needs" are vaguely defined, leaving judges to consider subjectively facts presented. In Ontario, in order to prosecute, a child must be an "endangered child," and the court must prove actual serious harm or imminent risk of such harm. The abuse must be "frontal and eviscerating" to be considered a matter for the court (Lewis, 1982). Clearly, the Canadian legal system does not hold great promise in the short term.

The problem of definition is long standing. Perhaps the following captures the essentials: psychological abuse is the denial of essential psychological nutrients or the denegation of personal worth through domination techniques and patterns of interaction which are damaging to the emerging personality. Behaviours which align with the definition can be specified. Most individual acts or remarks can be evaluated as abusive or nonabusive, but it is not an easy delineation. Both intent and interpretation play major roles in both the sender's and receiver's perception of what is abusive. The amorphous problem which remains relates to limits and boundaries. How distorted must interpersonal communication become before intervention is indicated?

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE IN THE FAMILY?

Bittner and Newberger (1981) suggest that family stresses include child-produced, social-situational, and parent-produced components. The first, child-produced stresses, include being physically different or mentally different. Parents expect their children to be perfect when born, and, when the newborn child shows obvious abnormalities such as Down's Syndrome, the parents are put under stress because of the differences. If the child presents difficulties, psychological maltreatment or physical abuse can be the end result. The second component of family stress, social-situational stress, would include such factors as poverty, unemployment, and fractured parental relationships. The last component deals with parent-produced stresses such as low self-esteem, ignorance of child rearing practices, unrealistic expectations of children, and the parent's having been abused as a child.

All three components of family stresses can, with an appropriate triggering mechanism like a family argument, lead to physical or emotional maltreatment of the child, either emotional abuse hurled at the

child directly or the burden of listening while one parent verbally assaults the other, often including comments about the physical or intellectual state of the listening child. The obvious solution is to reduce these stressful situations and thereby reduce the abuse – obvious, but not so simple. How can we guarantee the abolition of poverty, unemployment, and poor housing? As individuals we cannot. But there are things that might help.

One potential stress reducer is marital counselling. Counselling might point out appropriate ways to settle differences. Many abusive parents were themselves victims of violence and repeat what was inflicted upon them as children. Further help for parents can come from courses on parenting. Many parents appear to need knowledge concerning growth and development patterns in order to place their child's behaviour in a proper perspective.

Society should provide nurseries for preschool children, thus assisting single-parent families and families where both parents must work in order to make ends meet. Nursery provisions might provide relief in times of family stress associated with unemployment or when home situations reach a crisis stage. Similarly, housing available for battered wives and older children would serve a second function, to eliminate the emotional abuse associated with a child's watching a parent or sibling being battered.

Family and group psychotherapy must be made available. It is sometimes easier to talk to a person who does not function in an official capacity as an authority figure. Organizations such as Parents Anonymous relieve such fears.

A media blitz and public lectures on both physical and emotional abuse and its extent could help raise community consciousness. Realistic, nonsensational public education holds true promise for the general community.

#### WHAT CAN BE DONE IN THE SCHOOL?

There are a number of ways in which teachers can and should be involved in preventing emotional abuse. The first suggestion for teachers might appear somewhat obvious, but, in the long run, it could very well be the most profound for the teaching profession. Each teacher must make a commitment not to be verbally abusive. Most people are aware that some teachers use cutting sarcasm to belittle their captive audience.

Buscaglia (1973) requires teachers who are taking his course in psycholinguistics to monitor their own speech for a one-week period and identify 10 of their most commonly used expressions. Each teacher

requires her pupils to monitor her speech as well. In most cases, teachers report such things as "It is nice that you are in my class" and "Let's work together this morning." From the student monitoring came expressions such as "I'm tired of telling Joanne to work more quickly" and "this is the fifth time this week I've had to mention that!" We must listen to ourselves. We might be surprised by what we hear. Martin presents student advice to teachers that would eliminate or minimize student embarrassment: Teachers shouldn't "embarrass the students," "yell and scream their heads off," "report marks of individual students to the entire class," or "intrude into the 'private lives' of students." Teachers should "listen to opinions of students," "pay close attention to shy people," "learn to respect students," and "take courses to improve their attitudes toward students" (1985, p. 57).

Awareness of the problem of emotional abuse is a step in the right direction (Helfer, 1982). Teachers must recognize the tell-tale signs of abuse that children bring to school from the home. Helfer suggests as well that the public school should be a primary modality for teaching basic interpersonal skills and for providing information on child rearing skills as well as information on child abuse and neglect. Children must be taught to care for others – their classmates, the elderly, the handicapped, and the despondent.

Schools can perform an important role in educating future parents about conditions leading to child abuse. The emphasis in family life courses should be on parenting models, parent-child relationships, nutrition, child development, discipline, and emotional and psychological demands of parenthood. Our schools must ensure non-hostile, warm and caring environments for children who are abused in order that these children can come to expect logical, predictable consequences of their actions. (Manitoba Department, 1980, p. 8)

In keeping with this idea, the second recommendation of the *Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youths* (Department of Justice Canada, 1984) states:

The Committee recommends that one of the principal responsibilities of the program that is established in conjunction with the Office of the Commissioner co-ordinating federal, provincial, and non-government agencies' initiatives be concerned with the development and implementation of a continuing national program of public education and health promotion focussing specifically on the needs of young children and youths in relation to the prevention of sexual offenses and affording better protection for children, youths and adults who are victims. (p. 44)

These suggestions are just a few of the many that can be implemented to protect children from emotional and physical abuse. Unfortunately, neither form of abuse will be eradicated overnight, but we can make a

start, perhaps by vowing that as educators, in particular, and as human beings, in general, we will avoid abusive behaviour when dealing with those in our care.

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