THE EMOTIONALLY ABUSED AND NEGLECTED CHILD

Identification, Assessment and Intervention
A Practice Handbook
Second Edition

Dorota Iwaniec

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd
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Non ignara mali miseris succurrere disco*
[Not a stranger to misfortune, I learn to succour those who are unhappy]

for my husband
James,
with love

*Publius Vergilius Maro (70–19 BC): Æneid, Book 1, Line 630
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Dorota Iwaniec is Emeritus Professor of Social Work and former Director of the Institute of Child Care Research at Queen’s University Belfast (she retired in 2005). Professor Iwaniec is well-known for her extensive research and writing in the areas of emotional abuse and neglect and failure to thrive in children. She is the author of nearly a hundred scientific and practice papers and many chapters in edited books. She has written several books on the subject of child care and child protection and some books have been translated into different languages. Her writing is influenced by continuous practice and empirical evidence.
The first edition of *The Emotionally Abused and Neglected Child: Identification, Assessment and Intervention* was published 11 years ago. It focused very much on children who, due to neglect and emotional maltreatment, were insufficiently fed and nurtured, and therefore failed to thrive. Since then, our understanding of what constitutes emotional abuse and neglect and of how a child’s growth, development, behaviour, and well-being can be affected, has considerably increased. Public awareness of the problem and the professional skills in dealing with such cases have also improved.

The second edition is virtually a new book: it goes well beyond an update of the literature, and has been expanded to include much new material (e.g. emotional abuse outside the family, covering abuse of children in care, in schools, in remand centres for young offenders, and peer bullying), and a further chapter has been written on emotional abuse at home, including domestic violence, substance misuse, emotional neglect, and the effect of divorce on children. A study of children with disabilities is also an addition to the book, as is mention of risk and resilience. There is an extensive chapter on assessment based on the ecological model on children-in-need, covering parental capacity, children’s development and behaviour, and family and environmental factors. Many check-lists, questionnaires, and suggestions on how to identify and assess emotional abuse and neglect are also included.

Intervention and treatment of emotional abuse are covered in five extensive chapters, ranging from levels of intervention and service provision at different stages of presenting problems to individual work with children and families. Therapeutic methods include: behavioural/cognitive work with parents and children; family therapy; counselling; group work; attachment-work; play therapy; building resilience; social skills and assertiveness training; problem-solving; and many other techniques designed to deal with the effects of emotional abuse on children and emotionally abusive behaviour of parents and carers.

Service provision to help these children is described, elaborated upon, and discussed (e.g. day-nurseries, family centres, foster-placements, home-visitation, case-monitoring, and accommodation of children whose carers experience parenting problems). The last chapter looks at the legal aspects and the difficulties of taking emotional-abuse cases through the courts.
Issues of social workers’ professional credibility and confidence when dealing with emotional maltreatment of children are discussed. Attention is drawn to different roles and responsibilities of legal and social work professionals, and the necessity of receiving joint training is highlighted.

The primary sources for the first and second editions of *The Emotionally Abused and Neglected Child: Identification, Assessment and Intervention* have been a personal, lifelong interest in the subject, and experience gained in working in the field for over 40 years. Growing up after the 1939–45 war in Poland (which was devastated not only in an economic and physical sense, but also psychologically and emotionally) provided many unforgettable and painful images of orphaned and abandoned children who, at times, had no one to turn to for emotional support, comfort, reassurance, and protection. The images of very sad, detached, and devastated children are still with me to this day. There were many children whose mothers became so completely depressed (as the result of losses, cruelty, and war atrocities) that they could not provide a nurturing environment for their traumatised children. These children were often brought up in children’s homes or by relatives who cared for them because it was expected of them to do so and not because they wanted to. The lives of such children, as can be imagined, were grim, sad, devoid of affection and hope for the future, and often led to emotional breakdown and mental-health problems.

Later on in my adult life my social work experience gave me the opportunity to work with many such children, and prompted extensive research work, the development of helping strategies, and evaluation of the effectiveness of intervention. I saw many very unhappy children living with families, which, for one reason or another, could not provide the basic ingredients for the child’s sense of security and feelings of being loved. Many of these children succumbed to parental ill-treatment, at times with devastating results. The last ten years or so brought me back in touch with these children again through expert-witness work for the courts.

While the literature on what constitutes emotional abuse and how to identify it increases yearly, there is little written on how to help these children and how to evaluate the results of intervention and treatment. The second edition provides an extended section on intervention which, I hope, will help overburdened practitioners to choose methods, techniques, and services which will match the needs of those in need of care or protection. I also hope that this book will provide teaching material for students preparing for professional life and who, through their work, may come into contact with children such as those described within.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Holywood, Co Down
SECTION 1

THE PROBLEM
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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INTRODUCTION

Children, young people, or adults who suffered some form of abuse in the past, always refer to emotional hurt and psychological pain before mentioning physical pain. Almost without exception, victims of abuse will talk about fear, anxiety, loneliness, emotional lack of support, and being ignored, degraded and humiliated, feeling unloved and unwanted, and being powerless when terrorised or tormented by parents or carers. The popular slogan ‘words can hit as hard as fists’ is true when hurtful words are often used, and they mean to hurt. Gestures, tones of voice, manner, and frequency and intensity of these within the context of poor relationships will convey negative messages of not being loved, wanted, or appreciated to a child. Psychological unavailability of parents or carers to children, and hostile, rejecting, low-on-warmth, and high-on-criticism parental behaviour are identified as emotional abuse and neglect. But, in spite of recognised problems pointing to emotional abuse, this is the most difficult area of child maltreatment to measure with reasonable accuracy because parental behaviour and the effects on the child (including probable long-term development, competence, and social adjustment) have to be taken into account.
4 THE EMOTIONALLY ABUSED AND NEGLECTED CHILD

Unlike sexual and physical abuse and neglect, the emotional-abuse concept has been much slower to gain acceptance as a part of child protection, requiring conferencing, registration, assessment, and intervention including (in severe cases) court proceedings; such tardiness is not surprising, as emotional abuse is a dynamic and changeable social construct. What is considered today as emotionally abusive, requiring some form of intervention, was not the case a quarter of a century ago in the UK, and is not seen as abuse in many other countries even now. The very private and highly nebulous qualities of emotional abuse make it a difficult concept to define in a useful operational sense (see Chapter 2 for further discussion.)

However, there is now a general consensus that emotional abuse is more prevalent than realised: it is at the core of all major forms of abuse and neglect, is more damaging in its impact than acts of physical and sexual abuse alone, and requires special attention to disentangle it from physical and sexual acts of maltreatment. Much work has been done on both sides of the Atlantic in the last decade or so to provide empirical evidence and to expand theoretical knowledge on emotional abuse and neglect. Practice, although still somewhat problematic in resource allocation and protection, has become more explicit and better informed (Brassard, Germain, & Hart, 1987; Doyle, 1997; Glaser & Prior, 2002; Iwaniec, 1995).

There is also growing recognition that emotional abuse happens not only within the walls of the family home. Some children who are looked after, either by foster-parents or who reside in children’s homes, are also sometimes emotionally abused and neglected. Equally, young people in secure units or other penal systems are terrorised, degraded, humiliated, and threatened by staff and by older inmates. Given their vulnerability and problems, which led them to these institutions in the first place, it is not surprising that they cannot cope, and often are driven, out of despair, to take their own lives (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). It is believed that emotional abuse is quite widespread, but suffered in silence.

Services to help these children are rarely offered, as emotional abuse is still considered not serious enough to warrant prompt intervention. Taking into consideration the financial cost of child-protection work it is not surprising that decisions are made on what is ‘seen’ (physical injury) or what is morally unacceptable ‘sexual abuse’, leaving little resources and time for equally damaging emotional-abuse and neglect cases. In the United Kingdom the total cost for child protection per annum has been estimated at £735 million and in the United States at US $12 410 (World Health Organisation, 1999). Much discussion has taken place in recent years to work out policies and procedures to reduce cost, but at the same time to protect children. It would appear that much more should be done at a universal level as prevention. It is too late to step in when the damage is done and, subsequently, intervention
required at such times is very costly, of long duration, and quite often ineffective.

Binggeli, Hart, & Brassard (2001), after reviewing literature on emotional abuse (occurring either alone or in combination with other forms of maltreatment), estimated that psychological maltreatment may have been significantly present in the childhood histories of more than one-third of the general adult population of the United States. In addition, they estimated that approximately 10–15% of all people have experienced severe and chronic forms of emotional abuse. In spite of using conservative definitions, their figures for such experiences nevertheless were high.

HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

It would be fair to say that emotional abuse has been brought back to the public’s attention as a result of growing awareness and well-publicised cases of physical and sexual abuse and neglect. Yet emotional abuse is by no means a new phenomenon: Klosinski (1993) pointed out that emotional abuse (or the concept of emotional abuse) was an area of interest and research in the fields of psychoanalysis and developmental psychology in the early part of the twentieth century, and that the early literature on insecure attachment was clearly related to hostile, rejective, and cruel parenting, which forms the basis of contemporary understanding of emotional abuse. Of course, literature, paintings, and historical accounts are full of descriptions and depictions of emotionally maltreated children and young people: the novelist Charles Dickens (1812–70) alone brought to public attention the plight of abandoned, terrorised, corrupted, rejected, and destitute children (what we would now call ‘street children’) in nineteenth-century England.

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), writer and poet, vividly described in a short story the emotionally traumatising experiences he and his sister Trix had as children, when their parents left them in England with a completely strange and rather cruel woman before returning to India. This was by no means unusual for families serving the Raj, as many children whose parents worked and lived in India were boarded out in England. However, in Kipling’s case it was disastrous. In the short story entitled Baa Baa, Black Sheep, republished in 1995 by the Penguin Group, he described how the woman (and her family) treated them. She had always referred to him as ‘Black Sheep’, which left an emotional scar on him for life. Quoting the well-known nursery rhyme to express his own feelings, he saw himself in it:

Baa, baa, black sheep
Have you any wool?
Yes, Sir, yes, Sir,
Three bags full:
One for the master,
And one for the dame,
None for the little boy
Who cries down the lane.

Rudyard and Trix were boarded with Mrs Pryse Agar Holloway in Southsea, Hampshire, where they stayed for several years. Neither child was prepared for this, nor was anything explained to them beforehand. Trix wrote that it was ‘like a double death, or rather, like an avalanche that had swept away everything happy and familiar’ (Fleming, 1939, p. 171).

When Kipling and his sister found their mother had gone, they went to the sea-shore to try to find her, but could not do so (Kipling, 1995, p. 11). Soon ‘Aunty Rosa’ (Mrs Holloway), according to Kipling, set sister against brother, humiliated the ‘Black Sheep’ (as she called him), and permitted (even egged on) her son to terrorise and torment the boy, both mentally and physically, while she denied him simple things. On top of these horrors, the youngster was introduced to a fearsome Calvinistic hell (Kipling, 1990, Ch. 1), and forced to read religious books and tracts, thus acquiring biblical knowledge and imagery. For Rudyard it was terrifying teaching as he had grown up, while in India with his parents, in a relaxed and undemanding way.

After a few years ‘Punch’ (as Kipling was called by his parents) began to show manifestations of clumsiness, banging into things, breaking objects, becoming frightened of simple things, and terrified all the time, as his sister became more and more estranged. One day, a ‘visitor . . . who knew their parents came to see the children, looked deep down in the “Black Sheep’s” eyes for half a minute, and then said suddenly: “Good God, the little chap’s nearly blind”’. The ‘visitor’ was none other than Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98), the distinguished painter (married to Alice Kipling’s sister Georgiana [1840–1920]), who immediately informed Alice Kipling of her son’s condition. When Alice arrived at what Kipling called the ‘House of Desolation’ her children, unsurprisingly, had difficulty adjusting to her, and the ‘Black Sheep’ referred to her as ‘that woman’. Nevertheless, Alice noticed that the cold, repressive, loveless regime at Southsea had distressed the boy ‘with a system of small deceptions’ which ‘Aunty Rosa’ then magnified into ‘deadly sins’. The ‘Fear of the Lord was so often the beginning of falsehood’ (Kipling, 1995, p. 38). Having drunk deep of the bitter waters of Hate, Suspicion, and Despair, all the love in the world will not wholly take away that knowledge; though it may turn darkened eyes for a while to the light, and teach Faith where no Faith was’ (Kipling, 1995, p. 39).

Kipling was to write later that his experiences in the ‘House of Desolation’ bred in him a ‘constant wariness, the habit of observation, and attendance on moods and tempers’ (Kipling, 1990, Ch. 1), but that he was saved and
compensated by the annual visit to his aunt Georgiana at her house in Fulham, London, which he described as a ‘paradise’ of ‘love and affection’ (Kipling, 1990, Ch. 1), and where he saw his uncle at work and heard him conversing with friends in an easy, humorous manner.

However, Kipling had some sort of nervous collapse as a result of his experiences in Southsea, and Trix, who at first seemed less affected by the ‘House of Desolation’, suffered from a series of mental breakdowns for the greater part of her subsequent life, obliging her mother to care for her until she died in 1910. Kipling himself suffered from pain and chronic ill health. He claimed that his experiences in Southsea had ‘drained’ him of ‘any capacity for real, personal hate’ for the rest of his days (Kipling, 1990, Ch. 1).

Sometimes excessive parental pressure for a child to achieve what its parents want them to achieve without due consideration for what the youngster is able to do, and overcorrection of the child’s interests, may, unwittingly, result in emotional abuse. No one could have expressed this better than the novelist Franz Kafka (1883–1924) in the Letter to his father (1919):

What I would have needed was a little encouragement, a little friendliness, a little keeping open of my road, instead of which you blocked it for me, though, of course, with the good intention of making me go another road. But I was not fit for that.

It is important to remember that there are elements of psychological abuse in all parenting, with most parents saying and doing thoughtless or inappropriate things to their children on occasions but, in general, they are caring and loving. Trowell (1983) suggested that ‘adversity in manageable doses that comes in digestible packages’ is essential for normal development. Children cannot be brought up wrapped up in cotton wool, devoid of painful experiences, but we would not label that as emotional abuse. In contrast, emotional abuse is a persistent, chronic pattern of parental behaviour, often towards a particularly vulnerable child, which over the years becomes internalised and gives rise to the feeling that the child alone is to blame. Laing (1976) quotes a poem of an emotionally confused and hurting child:

My mother does not love me, I feel bad,
I feel bad because she does not love me,
I am bad because I feel bad,
I am bad because she does not love me,
She does not love me because I am bad.

Children who have been emotionally abused consistently give up trying to progress in their development and succumb to ‘learned helplessness’ (Suligman, 1975), a state of mind which is characterised by the belief that one has no control over the outcome of adverse events. Once established,
such an attitude is very difficult to reverse or eradicate. There is much evidence from follow-up studies that unless something is done to help them, emotionally abused children may, as adults, be unable to form warm, intimate relationships, and have difficulty with the management of hostility and aggression which, it is claimed, may give rise to depression in later life (Rutter, 1995b).

EARLY STUDIES

Some of the best documentations of early emotional abuse, neglect, and absence of nurturing (resulting in poor growth, problematic psychosocial development, and emotionally disturbed behaviour) were those of Spitz (1945, 1946) and Widdowson (1951). A significant aetiological factor was gleaned from Spitz’s study of infants cared for by their mothers, whom Spitz compared with another group raised in virtual isolation from other infants and adults. Children who were given physical and medical care, but no emotional care, contracted more infections, suffered from intellectual deficit and developed a condition called anaclitic depression manifesting itself in withdrawal, retardation in cognitive development, failure to thrive, insomnia, and sadness, and 37% of them died by the age of two.

Widdowson (1951) replicated Spitz’s findings and proved that provision of adequate nutrition in an unfavourable emotional environment (due to harsh and unsympathetic handling) may seriously curtail growth rate and produce emotional and educational problems. Widdowson studied children in two German orphanages just after the Second World War. A dietary supplement, which was expected to produce faster weight-gain, was introduced as an experiment in one orphanage, using the other as a control. Contrary to expectations, it was the control group which gained weight and grew a little faster during the experimental period of six months. What was also observed was that the children in the experimental group began to show emotionally disturbed behaviour (e.g. weeping, irritability, frustration, sadness, sleeping problems, and quarrelsome behaviours). When analysing these fascinating and worrying findings, it was discovered that the matrons of the two orphanages had swapped over at about the time of the start of the dietary supplement. The matron of the first orphanage had been warm, kind, and attentive to the children’s emotional needs, but the matron of the control group (who had transferred to the experimental group) was emotionally unavailable, critical, demanding, distant, harsh, not interested in emotional needs, and unsupportive. Her regime and treatment of children was emotionally abusive and harmful and, due to her anxiety- and fear-provoking behaviour, the children lost their appetites: even if they took food the calories were wasted and consumed by constant stress.
INTRODUCTION TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT

It is now a cliché that a child needs close, confident and warm physical and emotional contact (mother, father, or other carer) in order to grow and develop healthily and happily. The absence of such continuing nurturance and physically gentle intimacy can bring about anxiety and confusion in the child (e.g. fretting and disruption of biological functions). Montague (1978), in his chapter on ‘Tender loving care’, describes the effects of emotionally available care for very sick, hospitalised children, and relates an interesting anecdote. In a German hospital before the Second World War, a visiting American doctor, while being shown over the wards in one of the hospitals, noticed an old woman who was carrying a very undernourished infant. He enquired of the director who the old woman was and was told that she was ‘Old Anna’: when the staff at the hospital had done everything they could medically for the baby and it still did not make much progress, they handed it over to ‘Old Anna’, who succeeded in getting the child into a better psychological state and physical health. She rocked the baby, held it closely to her, carried it, talked to it in a gentle, reassuring way, giving caring and tender attention as well as the close physical contact which every baby needs. It is not surprising that babies passed to her, who had been near death’s door (despite all the physical treatment then available to doctors) did better with her unsophisticated but essentially nurturing tender care.

Both popular writing and research literature have drawn attention to the importance, over many centuries, of emotional nurturing, and to the detrimental effects that severe and prolonged emotional deprivation (what we call these days ‘emotional abuse’) can have on children and young people (and for that matter on all people generally).

THE CONCEPT OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE

It was not until the 1980s that emotional abuse was fully recognised as a distinct form of child maltreatment with its own causalities, manifestations, and consequences, appearing independently on the child-protection register and being dealt with in its own right. However, decision-making on when, how, and why to intervene in such cases proved to be more problematic.

Lack of confidence among practitioners dealing with child-protection cases, especially with emotional abuse and neglect, was mostly due (and still is) to lack of certainty about at what point emotionally harsh treatment becomes emotional abuse, and how bad emotional abuse has to become to warrant classification of significant harm requiring child-protection action. These difficulties are not easy to overcome or to be simplified, as signs of emotional abuse are not universal to all emotionally abused children. Some are straightforward and speak for themselves once identified (e.g. severe
failure to thrive): others, however, are far more subtle and open to misinterpretation.

Because of difficulties in substantiating emotional abuse and proving its harmful nature, both researchers and child-protection agencies have tended to keep a low profile, resulting in slow progress in academic and practice arenas: this is clearly illustrated in the work of Behl, Conyngham, and May (2003). The authors undertook a review of the child-maltreatment articles of six journals specialising in this subject. Examining four types of child abuse (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and emotional abuse), they found that articles specific to emotional abuse were very few. Despite the fact that in the 1980s studies began to separate different forms of abuse, recognising that outcomes of each type may be different, child emotional abuse and neglect was not part of this ‘great leap forward’. While the number of research articles on the issues of child maltreatment increased from 54 in 1977 to 344 in 1998, a total of only 15 of these were dedicated solely to the issue of child emotional abuse and neglect. This represented 4.2% of all the articles on child maltreatment over a 22-year period. In addition to this impoverished interest in researching and writing about emotional abuse, much of the writing was concerned with the issue of definition.

It is believed that lack of interest in and focus on child emotional abuse may be due to the perception that it has fewer negative consequences than other forms of child maltreatment. As far as research on emotional abuse is concerned, it is also far more difficult to design rigorous investigations in the absence of validated measures specifically developed for this purpose. Equally, very little is written on how to help abused and abusers, and little evaluative research is available to tell us what works in helping emotionally abused children and their abusive carers. The review of the current literature would suggest that this trend has changed for the better as far as registration is concerned (Doyle, 1997; Glaser & Prior, 1997), but problems with definition still exist, as do the difficulties in accepting that persistent emotional abuse and neglect can lead to significant harm with serious consequences. What can be more serious than a child being driven to take its own life because of severe emotional abuse; or a child’s growth being arrested and psychosocial development delayed and disturbed because of rejection and neglect; or a child being prevented from learning various life-skills and to be socialised because of crippling overprotection; or a child being paralysed by fear and anxiety because of living in a violent home? The sheer unhappiness, constant distress, and psychological pain experienced by some children have to be taken into consideration if there is a sincere desire to help them and to improve the quality of life and prospects for a healthy and happy childhood. There is no better way to introduce the reader to emotional abuse and neglect of children and young people than to share a few case studies describing various forms of emotional abuse and neglect of different severity.