

Emotional abuse & psychological
neglect –
Harmful parent-child
interactions

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Emotional abuse & neglect in context of overall child maltreatment

1. Most harm of child abuse and neglect is psychological
2. Several forms of child abuse & neglect often co-exist, **but EA can exist alone**
3. The child may be harmed without parental intention to harm the child
4. Explanations help but do not absolve from need to intervene

Significant Harm

Ill treatment

physical, mental or sexual

actually or likely to cause harm

AND/OR

Impairment (Harm to)

of the child's physical or mental **health**, *or*
physical, intellectual, emotional, social or
behavioural development

attributable to the care received by the child

'Devastating Consequences'

Egeland (2009)

1. Emotional state

- Unhappiness/depression
- Low self-esteem
- Fear
- Distress
- Anxious / PTSD

2. Behaviour

- Attention seeking
- Oppositional defiant - conduct disorder
- Age-inappropriately responsible

3. Developmental / educational attainment (& opportunity)

- Developmental or educational underachievement
- School non-attendance / lateness

4. Peer relationships

- Withdrawn or isolated
- Aggressive

5. Physical state

- Non-organic pains & other symptoms
- Faltering growth / failure to thrive

Threshold definition of emotional abuse

- **Persistent** interactions typical of a relationship, not single event(s)*
- Actually or potentially **harmful**
- Include **commission & omission**
- **Physical** contact **not** necessary

- *Many examples within this overall definition*

- Intention to harm the child is not required for the definition
- Explanations help but do not nullify

I

Parental
**Emotional unavailability,
unresponsiveness
and neglect**

(especially in 1st 1-2 years)

(APSAC - Denying emotional
responsiveness)

Violates child's need/right to be noticed

II

Child perceived as deserving
hostility
blaming
denigration
rejection
scapegoating

(APSAC – Spurning)

Violates child's need/right to be accepted & loved

III

Developmentally inappropriate interactions with the child

- Inconsistent & inappropriate discipline
- Expectations beyond or below child's developmental capabilities
- Exposure to confusing or traumatic experiences including **domestic violence**

(APSAC – Terrorizing, also included in Exploiting/Corrupting)

Violates child's need/right to be treated at her/his particular developmental stage

IV

Failure to recognise/acknowledge child's individuality

- Using the child for the fulfilment of the parents' psychological needs
- Inability to distinguish between the child's reality and the adult's belief & wishes

(APSAC – included in Exploiting/Corrupting)

Violates child's need/right to be considered as an individual

Kahlil Gibran – The Prophet

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They came through you but not from you and though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday. You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

V

Failure to promote child's socialisation within child's context

- Actively promoting mis-socialisation
- Failing to promote the child's social adaptation (including by isolating)
- Failure to provide adequate stimulation & opportunities for learning

(APSAC – isolating, also included in Exploiting/Corrupting)

Violates child's need/right to socialise

Categories of emotional abuse

- Orthogonal
- Different categories can occur together
- One often 'driving'
- Severity varies

Cultural Aspects

- Is it harmful?
- Is it cultural?
 - ‘Vignette’ test
- (?) Categories applicable across cultures
- Different interactions within categories in different cultures

Severity

- Severity of ill treatment:
 - Intensity, chronicity
- Effects = resultant of interaction between severity of ill treatment & child's age, gender, temperament, (mal)adaptive schema
- The respective categories contribute unique variance in predicting various outcomes
- NO validated measures of severity

The use & power of descriptions of persistent harmful parent-child interactions

- Descriptions are specific, in contrast to terms such as neglect or emotional abuse
- Difficult to argue with
- Useful in communicating concerns to the parents
- Helpful in talking with the child about his/her experiences

	Sexual abuse	Physical abuse	Emotional abuse/ neglect
Abuse/ interaction	Hidden	Hidden or observed	<i>Observable</i>
Identity of abuser	Usually questioned	Sometimes known	<i>Known</i>
Abuser & prim. carer	Different persons	Same/ diff. persons	<i>Same person</i>
Need for immediate protection	Yes	Usually	<i>No</i>

The meaning of the term 'abuse'

- Imperative to intervene

but

- Need to uncouple 'abuse' from immediate protection

4 tier model

Tier 0

Family & social factors

Poverty, social isolation, displacement

Tier 1

Parental risk factors

Incl. Mental ill-health, domestic violence, substance misuse

Tier 2

Parent-child interactions

Tier 3

Child's functioning

Reasons for tiers

- Clearer picture
- Separates description from explanation
- Evidence of actual maltreatment
 - Tier 1 not enough
 - Tier 3 not enough
 - Need Tier 2 (for emotional abuse and neglect)
- Indicate where and how to intervene

Assessment

I. CHILD

Developmental profile of child - physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, social.

Exclude organic causes

Establish baseline & severity

- Observation of interaction
- Interview with child
- Parental report
- School reports – attendance, learning, behaviour, peer relationships
- Measures – instruments - SDQ

How can we ask children to describe harmful parent-child interactions?

'Biting the hand that feeds you'

While child in abusive situation

Abuser = primary carer

- Child loyal to/ dare not upset primary carer
- Difficult to acknowledge awfulness of being rejected, unloved, exploited
- Threat to own survival and self worth
- Abuse denied, rationalised, reframed
- Child may not realise being used

Talking with the child

- Child's beliefs/understanding of their illness
- What it is like to be
- What child most worried about
- What child would like to be different

II. PARENTS & FAMILY

Interview and observation

1. Family's concerns about child
 - Reasons for concerns
2. Explanations for concerns
3. What remedies have been tried
4. Nature of help requested by family
5. Salient family incl. parents' history
6. Parent mental health, substance misuse & inter-parental violence
7. Family's social context
8. Strengths and protective factors

Testing the family's capacity to change

Time limited trial of intervention

(6 months v. stuck cases)

- Attending to Tier 0 & Tier 1 concerns
- Specific treatment approaches for different categories
- Remediation of child's acute difficulties

Trial of intervention

Category 1: **Emotional unavailability**

- Intervene 1st in **parental risk factors:**
 - **DV; Drug & alcohol abuse; Adult mental health issues**
- Then work on parent –child relationship

Category 2: **Negative attributions -**

Explore with carer(s) what child's view of him/herself might be & how to alter it

Trial of intervention

Category 3: Inappropriate Developmental Expectations, inconsistent and/or harsh parenting - often young children with behaviour problems (not due to ADHD or autism spectrum) –

Refer for **trial** of Parenting work, ?Family centres

Trial of intervention

Category 4: **Using the child for parent's needs**

- Look for maintaining factors for parent
- Explore child's perceptions with parent
- Look for ghosts from the **past**

Category 5: **Not promoting socialisation**

- Parent skills training
- Discuss effects on child with education
- Explore with parent, the child's experience in her/his environment

Working *towards* protection

Assessment: time limited trial of intervention towards change

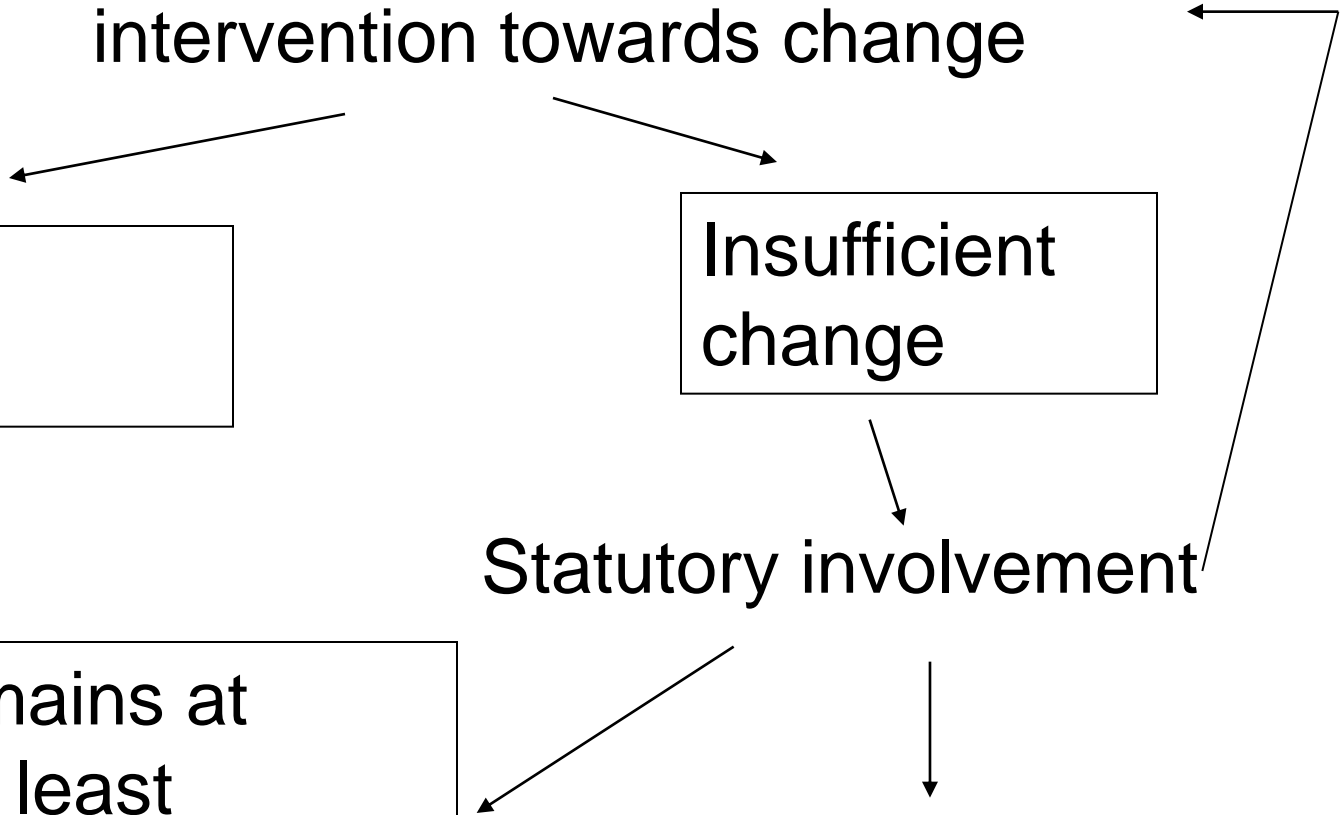
Sufficient change

Insufficient change

Statutory involvement

Child remains at home as least detrimental alternative

Child looked after by alternative carers *N.B. contact*



Working with the child

- ***Coping*** within family if EA continues
 - ❖ Exploring child's experiences
 - ❖ Explaining parents' difficulties
 - ❖ Problem solving - coping with EA
 - ❖ Working with child's maladaptive schema: guilt, vulnerability, shame
 - ❖ Encouraging relationship with positive adult
 - ❖ Ensuring educational attainments

A pathway

- 1.** Initial observations & information about children and families of concern need to be separated into the appropriate tiers of concern:
 - Tier 0 - Social & Environmental Factors
 - Tier 1 - Caregiver risk factors
 - Tier 2 - Caregiver-child interactions
 - Tier 3 - Child's functioning.
- 2.** If information is lacking about one or more of the tiers, it needs to be gathered.

3. Tier 2 includes the non-physical, harmful parent-child interactions which constitute emotional abuse and neglect. These interactions need to be *described*.
4. Assign different forms of persistent harmful parent child interactions into the most appropriate categories
5. Ascertain which Tier 3 child concerns are due to emotional abuse and neglect
6. Estimate severity of emotional abuse & neglect
7. Initial intervention is time limited trial of family's capacity to change

- 8.** Intervention needs to address Tier 0 & Tier 1 concerns which will involve a number of different agencies. Therapeutic intervention is offered according to the categories of emotional abuse (Tier 2) which are occurring for this child.
- 9.** Intervention may lead to improvement.
If family do not engage, then refer to statutory child protection services to encourage the family to participate.

10. If the family still do not engage or if there is insufficient change, consideration needs to be given to placing the child in an alternative family.

11. Some children will be too old to move, or removal may be inappropriate. Direct, therapeutic work is then offered to the child to enhance coping with the ongoing emotional abuse.

Conclusions

- Emotional abuse & neglect is common & harmful
- Useful to organise information in 4 tiers
- Description of **harmful parent-child interactions** (tier 2) is the evidence
- Categories of harmful parent-child interactions indicate how to intervene
- Possible to intervene without invoking child protection procedures
- *Trial* of family's capacity to change

Glaser, D. (2011) How to deal with emotional abuse and neglect —Further development of a conceptual framework (FRAMEA). *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35, 866-875