

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse is the ongoing emotional maltreatment or emotional neglect of a child. It's sometimes called psychological abuse and can seriously damage a child's emotional health and development. Children who are emotionally abused are usually suffering another type of abuse or neglect at the same time – but this isn't always the case.

Emotional abuse can involve deliberately trying to scare or humiliate a child or isolating or ignoring them.

Although the effects of emotional abuse might take a long time to be recognisable, practitioners will be in a position to observe it, for example, in the way that a parent interacts with their child. Emotional abuse may involve deliberately telling a child that they are worthless, or unloved and inadequate. It may include not giving a child opportunities.

What does emotional abuse include?

Because there's an element of emotional abuse in all other types of child abuse and neglect, it can be difficult to spot the signs and to separate what's emotional abuse from other types of abuse. Emotional abuse includes:

- humiliating or constantly criticising a child, for example, by name-calling or making negative comparisons.
- threatening, shouting at a child or calling them names
- making the child the subject of jokes, or using sarcasm to hurt a child
- blaming, scapegoating
- making a child perform degrading acts
- not recognising a child's own individuality, trying to control their lives
- pushing a child too hard or not recognising their limitations
- exposing a child to distressing events or interactions such as domestic abuse or drug taking
- failing to promote a child's social development
- not allowing them to have friends
- persistently ignoring them, withdrawing their attention from their child, giving their child the “cold shoulder”
- blaming their problems on their child
- being absent
- manipulating a child
- never saying anything kind, expressing positive feelings or congratulating a child on successes
- never showing any emotions in interactions with a child, also known as emotional neglect

Emotional abuse is the second most common reason for children needing protection from abuse.

Types of emotional abuse

Just like child neglect, there are two different types of emotional abuse which affect children in different way.

Passive emotional abuse

When a parent or carer denies their child the love and care they need in order to be healthy and happy it's known as “passive” abuse. It's just as damaging, but it can be harder to spot than “active” abuse. The definitions for passive emotional abuse and emotional neglect are very similar.

Five categories of passive emotional abuse have been identified:

Emotional unavailability

where a parent or carer is not connected with the child and cannot give them the love that they deserve and need

Negative attitudes

such as having a low opinion of the child and not offering any praise or encouragement

Developmentally inappropriate interaction with the child

either expecting the child to perform tasks that they are not emotionally mature enough to do or speaking and acting in an inappropriate way in front of a child

Failure to recognise a child's individuality

this can mean an adult relying on a child to fulfil their emotional needs and not recognising that the child has needs

Failure to promote social adaptation

not encouraging a child to make friends and mix among their own social peers.

Active emotional abuse

When someone intentionally scares, demeans or verbally abuses a child it's known as “active” abuse. This requires a premeditated intention to harm a child.

Active emotional abuse has been defined as:

- spurning (rejecting)
- terrorising
- isolating
- exploiting or corrupting.

Sometimes a fifth category of “ignoring” is also included.

Why emotional abuse happens

Periods of high stress and tension, such as money worries or unemployment, can take a parent's or carer's focus away from providing the emotional love and support that a child needs.

They may:

- be emotionally unavailable, because they're not around or too tired
- forget to offer praise and encouragement

- expect a child to take on too much responsibility for their age, for example caring for other family members
- be over-protective, limiting opportunities to explore, learn and make friends
- expect a child to meet their own emotional needs
- take out their anger and frustration on their child.

If a parent had a bad experience when they were a child or has bad role models around them now then this can affect the way they look after their own children.

Some parents may find it difficult to understand why their child is behaving in a certain way, and they can react badly. For example, they might think that their baby is crying to annoy them.

Emotional abuse may also be caused by a poor bond or relationship between a parent or carer and their child.

Emotional abuse - signs, symptoms and effects

There often aren't any obvious physical symptoms of emotional abuse or neglect but you may spot signs in a child's actions or emotions.

Changes in emotions are a normal part of growing up, so it can be really difficult to tell if a child is being emotionally abused.

Babies and pre-school children who are being emotionally abused or neglected may:

- be overly-affectionate towards strangers or people they haven't known for very long
- lack confidence or become wary or anxious
- not appear to have a close relationship with their parent, e.g. when being taken to or collected from nursery etc.
- be aggressive or nasty towards other children and animals.

Older children may:

- use language, act in a way or know about things that you wouldn't expect them to know for their age
- struggle to control strong emotions or have extreme outbursts
- seem isolated from their parents
- lack social skills or have few, if any, friends.
- appear to be excessively withdrawn, fearful, or anxious about doing something wrong;

Parents' behaviour

All parents tell their children off from time to time. And sometimes the relationship between them might seem strained. But if you notice severe or constant harsh behaviour, or that a child seems scared or unfeeling towards their parent, it could be a sign that the child is being emotionally abused.

NSPCC statistics

We don't know exactly how many children experience emotional abuse. But official statistics tell us how many children have been identified as being at risk of harm from emotional abuse. Research studies give us a better picture of children's experiences.

- 1 in 14 children have experienced emotional abuse by a parent or guardian.
- Emotional abuse is the second most common reason for children needing protection from abuse
- 13% of contacts to the NSPCC's helpline in 2019 were concerns about emotional abuse
- The NSPCC's helpline responded to over 7,100 contacts about emotional abuse last year

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/emotional-abuse/emotional-abuse-facts-statistics/>

Things you may notice

If you're worried that a child is being abused, watch out for any unusual behaviour.

- withdrawn
- suddenly behaves differently
- anxious
- clingy
- depressed
- aggressive
- problems sleeping
- eating disorders
- wets the bed
- soils clothes
- takes risks
- misses school
- changes in eating habits
- obsessive behaviour
- nightmares
- drugs
- alcohol
- self-harm
- thoughts about suicide

These signs don't necessarily mean that a child is being emotionally abused. Some children are quiet and teenagers may have challenging behaviour. Sometimes it can take a long time for the symptoms to show. But you should look out for any behaviour that seems out of character for a child.

What school staff should do if they have concerns about a child

If staff members have any **concerns** about a child they will need to decide what action to take.

Any concern about a child should **always** trigger a conversation with the designated safeguarding lead to agree a course of action, although any staff member can make a referral to children’s social care. (Additional options could include referral to specialist services or early help services and should be made in accordance with the referral threshold set by the Local Safeguarding Children Board).

Additional guidance and further reading

- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges** (September 2023)
- **What to Do If You’re Worried a Child Is Being Abused** (2015)
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children** (July 2018)
- **Effective Support for Children and Families in Essex** – guidance for all practitioners in working together with children and families to provide early help and targeted and specialist support (October 2021)
- **Essex Safeguarding Children Board**
<http://www.escb.org.uk/>
Includes a link to the **SET procedures (Southend, Essex, Thurrock Child Protection Procedures)**
- **National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**
www.nspcc.org.uk
<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect/emotional-abuse/what-is-emotional-abuse/>
- [Barlow and Schrader McMillan, 2010](#)
- [Cawson et al, 2000](#)
- The **NSPCC Helpline** is a service for anyone concerned about the safety or welfare of a child. You can contact the helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week by phone, email or online. 0808 800 5000
- **Childline**
<https://www.childline.org.uk/> 0800 1111
- **No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse (NSPCC)**
- **How safe are our children? NSPCC report**
- <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/pre-2013/child-abuse-and-neglect-in-the-uk-today/>