

## **Words Can Hurt**

**By Anne Cohn Donnelly, D.P.H.**

Emotional abuse, inflicted by a trusted adult, can shatter a child's self-image and leave scars that last a lifetime.

"Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me!" Unfortunately, that childhood refrain couldn't be further from the truth.

Think of what happens when some harried and thoughtless adult flings words like these at a child: "Hey, stupid, don't you know how to listen?" or "You're worthless; why don't you find some other place to live?" or "You disgust me; just shut up."

Sometimes it's an unending refrain like, "I wish you were never born," "You're more trouble than you're worth," or "You can't do anything right."

The words may be uttered by any adult—a parent, teacher, favorite relative, even a Scout leader. Coming from a trusted adult, they can hit as hard as a fist, sometimes much harder. No bones are broken, but the words leave vicious emotional scars. Inflicted repeatedly for months or years, the bruises heal slowly and can shatter a youngster's self-image, turning the child into an emotional cripple for life.

Children pay a terrible price for emotional abuse from parents and other adults. Some live with bursts of rage every day or wild mood swings. Other children get no attention at all, even when they most need a hug or a caring word. Children need to feel cared for and safe. And they need to feel worthwhile.

The many forms of emotional abuse all have this description in common: The victims are children, their personalities have been attacked, and sense of personal value is undermined. They are left feeling unloved, unsafe, and not worthwhile.

In the last decade we have learned that emotional abuse is deep-seated, widespread, and preventable. This article answers the most-asked questions about emotional abuse, including what it is and isn't, why it happens, and what can be done about it. We also offer tips to help adults avoid being emotionally abusive, as well as suggestions for talking to children who have experienced emotional abuse.

**What is emotional abuse?** Basically, it's the constant belittling, criticizing, and pulling down of a child, most often done verbally. This maltreatment, which results in impaired psychological growth and development, includes rejection, intimidation, or humiliation of a child, and chaotic, bizarre, or hostile acts which produce fear or guilt. It also includes lack of nurturing or acceptance, and other actions which damage a child's intellectual or psychological functioning.

It is important to note that emotional abuse is characterized by a pervasive pattern of negative parental behaviors and not simply by isolated incidents or the normal ebb and flow of adult emotions. While children are resilient enough to bounce back from the occasional insult or criticism,

a constant barrage can crush a child's personality. Chronic carping, belittling, and criticizing undermine a child's personal development; the steady diet of gloom and grouching acts like a cancer, eating at a child's soul and destroying his belief in himself.

**How widespread is emotional abuse of children?** The problem is substantial. In the United States, more than 100,000 severe cases are reported to authorities annually. However, hundreds of thousands of cases go unreported. In addition, more than one million cases of physical and sexual abuse and physical neglect are reported annually, and they also involve emotional maltreatment.

**Is emotional abuse against the law?** Almost every state includes a definition of mental injury in its child abuse reporting laws. This makes chronic, serious emotional abuse a crime and thus a reportable offense. Such cases are rarely successfully prosecuted, however, because it is difficult, often impossible, to prove that emotional abuse has occurred and that a child has suffered severe psychological harm. Nevertheless, reporting such cases to the authorities is an important action, because it can result in vital help being offered to the family involved.

**Why do adults emotionally abuse children?** The reasons are often the same ones that cause physical abuse. Adults feel isolated, under stress, unable to cope. A lack of knowledge about a child's needs or abilities, extreme expectations of a child, and an inability to empathize can lead to emotional abuse. A troubled childhood characterized by abuse can be a contributing factor, as adults simply repeat behavior they experienced as children. Low self-esteem can also contribute, and an adult feeling badly about himself takes it out on someone smaller and defenseless.

*Any* adult involved in a relationship with a child is a potential emotional abuser. And those with the strongest relationship with a child have the greatest power to hurt.

What sets emotional abuse apart from physical abuse is that emotional abusers are rarely aware of their verbal assaults on a child. They simply never stop to listen to what they are saying or consider its impact on a child.

For example, when an adult says, "I wish you were never born," what is probably meant is, "What you're doing right now is really annoying me and I've had a hard day and I wish you would stop." But a child cannot interpret the meaning behind the hurtful words and may soon come to believe them.

Fortunately, emotional abuse is somewhat more preventable than other forms of abuse. That's because many adults don't understand how their negative actions damage a child emotionally; an increased awareness on their part can result in a positive change in their behavior.

**How harmful is emotional abuse compared to physical abuse?** Emotional abuse can be even *more* harmful. Children can't show their scars right away, so the abuse usually continues longer than physical abuse, much the same as sexual abuse goes on for a long time because a child is afraid to tell anyone. As a result, the scars from both emotional and sexual abuse are often deeper and more hidden, and come back to haunt people later in their lives.

Emotionally-abused children often grow into adults with low self-esteem or self-worth, who are less

likely to accomplish much in their lives. Antisocial behavior, withdrawal, truancy and other school difficulties, and even suicidal tendencies are not unusual among young people who suffered serious emotional abuse as children. And, of course, those same young people may go on to abuse their own children.

Of course, not all emotionally-abused children grow up with such difficulties; some turn out just fine. Perhaps along the way some other adult—a relative, teacher, Scout leader, friend or series of friends—helps them understand that they are deserving of love and praise. They gain a perspective that helps them realize the hurtful words of one adult are not true. Or, an emotionally-abused child may receive more formal help. Therapy, individual or group, can help ameliorate the effects of emotional abuse.

**What are the signs of emotional abuse?** Many abused children appear sullen or withdrawn, depressed or listless. They may not smile very often and appear to have little joy in their lives. These children may be unwilling or unable to trust other adults or even their peers. They may act out their emotional abuse by being emotionally or physically abusive with their peers or with adults. They can be the bully of the troop or classroom, yelling and hassling others. Or they can be the child who shies away from any challenge or new experience—certain that he will fail, as he so often has been told.

**What can be done about emotional abuse?** We can all do certain things to help prevent emotional abuse. We all need to understand that (1) words can hurt as hard as a fist (2) children believe what their parents and trusted adults tell them, (3) adults should stop and *listen* to what they are saying to children (they might not believe their ears!), and (4) angry or frustrated adults ought to take time out rather than taking it out on a child.

As adults we can work to stop using words that hurt and start using words that help. We can also reach out to other adults—friends, neighbors, relatives—who we know are emotionally abusing a child. We could offer to give the adult some time off, by taking the child for an afternoon. We could be more direct and say "I remember how much it hurt me when my parents yelled at me like that." Or we could find a time to talk directly to the child, assuring him that he is not alone and help is available.

Finally, if we think that a child is being *seriously* emotionally abused, if the damage is evident and the adult makes no effort to change, we could report the abuse to the authorities.

Emotional abuse is an insidious, deeply-damaging form of abuse which can harm a child for a lifetime. We all have a role to play in its prevention. (For more information write: Prevent Emotional Abuse, Box 2866E, Chicago, Ill 60690.)

### **Pause Before Lashing Out**

You don't have to lift a hand to hurt a child. Words can inflict wounds that last a lifetime. The next time everyday pressures build up to where you feel like lashing out, try something else:

- Put your hands over your mouth. Count to 10, or better, 20.

- Stop in your tracks. Press your lips together and breathe deeply.
- Phone a friend.
- Say the alphabet out loud.
- Have someone watch the children while you go outside and take a leisurely walk.
- Splash cold water on your face.
- Close your eyes and imagine you're hearing what your child hears.
- Turn on the radio or TV.
- Hug a pillow.

Remember: take time out; don't take it out on your child.

### **Offer Words That Help**

Words can hurt—and help. Which ones do you use?

*Hurting words* slash at a child's self-confidence: "You're stupid." "What a slob!" "You're disgusting." "You're worthless."

*Helping words* show you care and make a child feel worthwhile and secure: "You can do it." "Great job." "You're beautiful." "I'm proud of you."

Children, like adults, want to feel safe, loved, and lovable. If you find yourself hurting a child by what you say or do, here are some simple rules for turning things around:

- Spend time with the child. Tell him he is important.
- Be someone a child can count on.

This doesn't mean you never get angry, but rather that the child knows you care about him even when you are angry.

- Praise a child's talents, strengths, special gifts.
- Teach children to cope with failure. No one can do everything well. Failures are a part of life—and a challenge to do better.
- When a child does something wrong, don't tell a child he is bad. Tell him the specific behavior is

bad.

- Help children think about and solve their own problems. Let them know you are available to talk with them about their feelings and concerns.
- Respect their feelings and thoughts. Children are people, too.

### **Talking to Children About Emotional Abuse**

Children need to know there are things they can do to help deal with situations of emotional abuse. Here is a guide for talking to them:

If abuse is from a parent, remember that parents are people, too. Your parents love you, but sometimes they don't know how to show it. Sometimes they are worried or afraid, or just plain angry. Don't judge them too harshly; it's not easy being a parent.

Find a quiet time to talk. Sometimes parents have trouble listening to kids when the family is in a uproar. They'll hear you better when things are calm.

Write a note. Make a list of what bothers you. Giving your parents a note telling your side of things may be easier than trying to say it directly. And if you can't write it down, perhaps a brother or sister, aunt or uncle, grandparent or other trusted adult can be your goodwill ambassador. Find *some* way to let your parents know how you feel.

Talk to someone you trust. Sometimes another person can help you see things more clearly. Maybe a relative, family friend, teacher, or clergyman can help you sort out your feelings. Remember, you are not alone; there is help out there and people do care.

If the abuse is from another adult, talk to your parent about it. Enlist his or her help in doing something about it; you don't have to solve this problem all by yourself.