

Warning Signs of Emotional Abuse

Although the scars aren't as visible, emotional abuse can be as damaging as physical or sexual abuse. But what is emotional abuse exactly? And are you abusing your child if you occasionally lose your temper? Here is an overview of emotional child abuse.

Emotional abuse of a child is any pattern of behaviour by parents or caregivers that can seriously interfere with a child's cognitive, emotional, psychological or social development. It can include:

- **Ignoring.** Either physically or psychologically, the parent or caregiver fails to respond to the child.
- **Rejecting.** Any active refusal to respond to a child's needs.
- **Isolating.** The parent or caregiver consistently prevents the child from having normal social interactions with peers, family members and adults.
- **Exploiting or corrupting.** During this kind of abuse, the child is taught, encouraged or forced to develop inappropriate or illegal behaviours.
- **Verbally assaulting.** This includes constantly belittling, shaming, ridiculing or verbally threatening the child.
- **Terrorising.** This form of abuse involves threatening or bullying the child and creating a climate of fear for the child.
- **Neglecting.** Neglect may include educational neglect, mental health neglect, or medical neglect (where a parent or caregiver denies or ignores a child's need for treatment for medical problems).

While the definition of emotional abuse is often complex and imprecise, experts agree that, for most parents, occasional negative attitudes or actions are not considered emotional abuse. It becomes abuse, however, when there is a persistent, chronic pattern that negatively affects a child's self-worth and psychological development. Typically, emotional abuse is not an isolated incident.

What are the indicators?

You can closely observe the child's behaviours and personality. Children suffering from emotional abuse are often extremely loyal to the parent, afraid of being punished if they report abuse, or, sadly, is so used to the abuse that they think it's a normal way of life.

Behavioural indicators of an emotionally abused child include:

- Inappropriate behaviour that is immature or more mature for the child's age
- Dramatic behavioural changes
- Aggressiveness
- Uncooperativeness
- Bedwetting or loss of bowel control
- Destructive or anti-social behaviour
- Poor relationships with peers
- Lack of self confidence
- Unusual fears for the child's age
- Inability to react with emotion

Of course, any of the above behaviours may also be seen in normal children, but a change in pattern of these behaviours is a strong indicator of emotional abuse.





Common characteristics of the abusing adult include:

- Blaming or belittling the child in public
- Describing the child negatively
- Always assuming the child is at fault
- Having unrealistic expectations of the child
- Openly admitting to disliking or hating the child
- Threatening the child with severe punishment
- Withdrawing comfort as a means of discipline
- Being emotionally cold and unsupportive
- Suffering from alcohol and drug abuse
- Having a violent nature

What are the effects of emotional abuse?

Like other types of abuse, the consequences of emotional child abuse can be serious and long-term. Many research studies conclude that psychopathologic symptoms are more likely to develop in emotionally abused children. These children may experience a lifelong pattern of depression, estrangement, anxiety, low self-esteem, inappropriate or troubled relationships, or a lack of empathy.

During their childhood, emotionally abused children may fail to thrive or their developmental progress may be halted. Some may also become poorly adjusted emotionally and psychologically. As teenagers, they find it difficult to trust, participate in and achieve happiness in interpersonal relationships, and resolve the complex feelings left over from their childhoods. As adults, they may have trouble recognising and appreciating the needs and feelings of their own children and emotionally abuse them as well.

What you can do

If you are worried that a child you know is suffering emotional abuse, it is your responsibility to report it to authorities.

If you feel your behaviour toward your own child is bordering on emotional abuse, here is what you should do:

- **Never be afraid to apologise to your child.** Children need to know that adults can admit when they are wrong.
- **Don't call your child names or attach labels to your child.** Names such as "Stupid" or "Lazy" erodes a child's self-esteem. A child deserves respect.
- **Address the behaviour that needs correcting and use appropriate discipline techniques,** such as time outs or natural consequences. Be sure to discuss the child's behaviour and the reason for the discipline, both before and immediately after you discipline.
- **Compliment your child** when he or she accomplishes even a small task.
- **Walk away from a situation when you feel you are losing control.** Isolate yourself in another room for a few minutes (after first making sure the child is safe), count to 10 before you say anything, ask for help from another adult or take a few deep breaths before reacting.
- **Get help.** Support is available for families at risk of emotional abuse through local child protection services agencies, doctors, mental health facilities and schools.

All children need acceptance, love, encouragement, discipline, consistency, stability and positive attention. Do what you can to ensure the children you know get what they deserve.

