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Background

I have worked for 13 years as a Clinical Psychologist in a range of governmental and non-governmental agencies. As a consequence, I have been repeatedly exposed to the devastating short and long term effects of emotional abuse and neglect on both children, adolescents and adults. I am currently employed, part-time, as a senior marriage and family therapist with the Canberra Marriage Counselling Service. I spend the rest of my occupational time working on my Ph.D. thesis which is related to the effects of traumatisation on police.

I offered to give this talk today because I believe most teachers are deeply committed to children and their welfare. You are in unique position to effectively identify and intervene with children who are being emotionally abused. You have a professional ability to make judgements about the degree to which a child's behavioural and academic development differs significantly from peers, or the child's previously displayed characteristics or abilities, when these differences cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors.

The relationship between a teacher and student is a very special one.

Children who seem to escape serious damage from extremely aversive living conditions have generally had at least one person who provided a stable and caring relationship. This person may not have been a parent or even a relative. Teachers are in a unique position to provide such a relationship and to potentially change the direction of a child's life. You, as teachers, have the chance to meet two of the paramount needs of the emotionally abused child. You can work actively towards improvement in a child's self-concept and you can provide such children with the experience of doing something correctly and being praised.

The school is the only institution in our society (and most others) through which virtually all young people pass . It requires more of the growing-up time of young people than any other waking activity during the developmental period (with the possible exception of television viewing). Therefore, the potential for helping emotionally abused children during their time at school is enormous. It is also absolutely essential because, as you would be only too aware, children whose basic psychological needs have not been met may be largely unavailable for new learning.

Within the constraints of the time available today, I hope to assist you in your work with emotionally abused children by providing a brief overview of the following areas:

Table I

Aims

- ❖ Definitions of emotional abuse
- ❖ Facts about emotional abuse
- ❖ Risk factors associated with emotional abuse
- ❖ Types of emotional abuse
- ❖ Effects of emotional abuse on children
- ❖ Emotional abuse in schools
- ❖ Options for effective intervention

The inadequacy of definitions of emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment has been a major stumbling block to progress in research or intervention. I recently looked through serials of the past

four years of the international journal " Child Abuse and Neglect " and I was unable to find one single article specifically addressing emotional abuse. This is indeed a sad fact when one begins to consider the profound effect such experiences have on individuals, marriages, families, organisations and societies in general.

The definition I have chosen to offer you today is one given unanimous support as a generic working definition by those attending an International Conference on the psychological abuse of children and youth i.e.:

Table 2

Definition of emotional abuse of children

" consists of acts of omission or commission which are judged on the basis of community standards and professional expertise to be psychologically damaging. Such acts are committed by individuals, singly or collectively, who by their characteristics (eg age,status, knowledge, organisational position) are in a position of differential power that renders a child vulnerable. Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioural, cognitive, emotional or physical functioning of the child (Brasard et al 1987)"

Despite the limited amount of resources allocated to the understanding and prevention of emotional abuse we are clear on a number of facts ie:

Table 3

Facts about emotional abuse

- ❖ a critical factor in the long-term effect of physical abuse is the associated emotional trauma eg perceived rejection, disrespect and hostility.
- ❖ a critical factor in the long-term effect of sexual abuse is the associated emotional trauma eg betrayal of trust, invasion of boundaries, complete lack of empathy with the child's needs.
- ❖ 90% of all prisoners in the USA are reported to be victims of childhood emotional abuse. Undoubtedly research in Australia would find similar results.
- ❖ MOST adults have, at some time, in some circumstance, emotionally abused a child.
- ❖ emotional abuse, in isolation, or in conjunction with physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect, is the primary cause of low self-esteem. Low self-esteem is a core issue in understanding an individual's unhappiness and inability to lead a contented, fulfilled and contributing life.
- ❖ unchecked emotional abuse can lead to anti-social attitudes, suicide, chronic depression and/or anxiety, severe relationship difficulties, personal abuse of power including domestic violence, repeated victimisation and a markedly reduced ability to effectively parent.
- ❖ human beings have a tendency to live up or down to their perception of themselves. Beliefs such as " I am bad " " I am stupid " or " No-one could like me " may become self-fulfilling prophecies.
- ❖ emotional abuse, or psychological maltreatment is a hidden form of child abuse. It may present as a behaviour disorder so the underlying emotional abuse may not be recognised.
- ❖ it is not only parents who emotionally abuse children. Emotional abuse is committed by relatives, neighbours, residential workers, therapists, childcare workers, medical staff, teachers etc . Emotional abuse of children is potentially inflicted by any adult who is in a position of power in relation to the child.

- ❖ emotional abuse of children is ALWAYS totally unacceptable.

The risk that emotional abuse will occur is said to be directly related to the extent to which the adult involved has had their own emotional needs met and has accurate and constructive perspectives regarding child behaviour and development.

Contrary to popular belief, emotional abuse occurs irrespective of the socio-economic background, educational level, race, employment status or culture of the inflicting adult. There are very few scientifically valid studies in the area of risk factors and the list provided in Table 4 is by no means exhaustive or exclusive.

Table 4

Risk factors

- ❖ an unwillingness on the part of the adult to take personal responsibility for the constructive expression of anger.
- ❖ a fundamental disregard for children's rights and feelings
- ❖ a restricted repertoire of behaviour management skills
- ❖ ignorance or unwillingness to exercise knowledge of child development and individual differences
- ❖ ineffective personal coping skills
- ❖ feeling overwhelmed by social or psychological stressors
- ❖ limited sources of quality social and emotional support

It is very clear that unless adults feel socially and psychologically secure enough to move beyond concern for themselves to provide the attention, energy, and nurturance that children need, it is unlikely that such individuals will be able to function effectively as caregivers, as instructors, or as providers of emotional support for children.

Emotional abuse can be inflicted upon a child in a variety of ways. The North American "Office for the Study of the Psychological rights of the Child " has devised the following list:

Table 5

Types of emotional abuse

- ❖ REJECTING eg treating a child differently from siblings or peers in ways suggesting dislike for the child, actively refusing to acknowledge or respond to a child's request for help.
- ❖ DEGRADING eg calling a child stupid, labeling as inferior, publicly humiliating.
- ❖ TERRORISING eg coercing a child by intimidation, making threats of physical violence, creating an environment of unpredictable threat or setting impossible expectations and punishing the child for not succeeding.
- ❖ ISOLATING eg separating the child from peers for extended periods of time, refusing to allow interactions or relationships with peers.
- ❖ CORRUPTING eg teaching or reinforcing acts that degrade those racially or ethnically different, teaching and reinforcing criminal behaviour. Providing antisocial and unrealistic models as normal, usual or appropriate via the public media
- ❖ EXPLOITING eg giving a child age-inappropriate responsibilities.

- ❖ DENYING eg ignoring a child's attempts to interact, mechanically responding to a child overtures.

To better understand these various forms of emotional abuse it is useful to examine them in the context of the major stages of development eg the first two years, two to five years, the early school years, pre-adolescence and adolescence.

Emotional abuse may take different forms at at different ages. For example, rejection in infancy may mean refusal to respond to the child's smiles and vocalisations while rejection in adolescence may mean ignoring the young person's individual viewpoint.

The present state of knowledge regarding the impact or consequences of emotional abuse fall into categories based on expert opinion and findings supported by research. Table 6 and 7 provides information from both these categories.

Table 6

Effects of emotional abuse

Emotional abuse is a very direct assault on the child's:

- ❖ perception of the self as valuable
- ❖ perception of the self as being valued or potentially valued by others
- ❖ perception of self as competent or potentially competent to perform necessary life tasks
- ❖ perception that other people and the general environment are responsive to self
- ❖ perception that the world is a positive or at least neutral place rather than innately hostile
- ❖ ability to learn from and adjust to the environment through producing fear of interaction with the environment, through which learning might take place; or through producing a level of fear of further abuse or failure, that affects the ability to focus attention on problem-solving
- ❖ ability to identify personal emotions and those of others accurately and the development of appropriate and differentiated responses to those emotions
- ❖ ability to perceive and respond positively to the desires and needs of others
- ❖ ability to form and maintain relationships through which learning may take place

More specifically, studies on the outcomes of emotional abuse show damage in the areas of cognitive, emotional, behavioural and social functioning. Examples include:

Table 7

Outcomes of Emotional Abuse

- ❖ **COGNITIVE**- delayed language development, reading disability, lowered performance in tests of reasoning, comprehension and speech, poor concentration, diminished attention span, impaired memory, mental confusion and disorientation, overall poor academic performance.
- ❖ **EMOTIONAL**- self-denigration and blaming, lowered self-esteem, age-inappropriate fears, depression, psychological distancing and numbing of responsiveness, low frustration tolerance, oversensitivity to constructive critical comment, poor body image, irritability, anxiety.
- ❖ **BEHAVIOURAL**- poor school attendance, unwillingness to leave school, negative attention-seeking, sleeping difficulties, speech disorders, bed-wetting, apathy, lethargy, stubborn or defiant behaviour, destruction of property, stealing, lying, poor appetite, overly compliant, very demanding.

- ❖ **SOCIAL-** poor peer relations, social isolation, hostile, cruel, exploitive or indifferent ways of relating to others, pseudomaturity, parenting other children, violent behaviour towards others.

I would now like to show you a fifteen minute film called " What Hurt? Emotional Abuse" . It is designed for use with school age children and may be borrowed from the National Library film lending collection.

Unfortunately, in sharp contrast to the sensitive behaviour demonstrated by the teacher in the video we have just seen, the level of participation and effectiveness of educators in dealing with child maltreatment has been generally disappointing. Recent literature indicates that school personnel often seriously under-report and often mishandle suspected child abuse and neglect for a variety of reasons. These reasons may include inadequate pre-service and in-service training, a lack of set policies and procedures to deal with such situations when they inevitably arise, obstruction by senior teaching and administrative staff, school personnel who are reluctant to interfere in family privacy, feelings that parents have the right to treat and discipline children as they wish, frustration with inadequate case handling, unclear definitions of child abuse and neglect, lack of confidence and poor responses or lack of follow-through from statutory and community agencies.

Although child abuse and neglect have generally been conceptualised and dealt with by educators as though they occurred outside the school, increasing attention has been given to the potential for and occurrence of child maltreatment in schools. There is evidence to indicate that maltreatment of children, perpetrated by an educator, may continue for years while being ignored by school personnel aware of its existence.

We still know very little about emotional abuse as expressed in educational environments. Its nature, antecedents and consequences are just beginning to be explored. Some of the ways in which teachers may emotionally abuse children are detailed in Table 8.

Table 8

Emotional abuse by teachers

- ❖ **DISCIPLINE AND CONTROL THROUGH FEAR AND INTIMIDATION** eg teacher disapproval, rejection, reproof, rejection of work, continuous experience of failure, high frequency of punishment in comparison to encouraging/praising behaviours, verbal abuse, unfair criticisms, put-downs, screaming at children, making inappropriate threats, use of homework as punishment, limited opportunity to use toilet facilities, condoning harassment of a student by other students
- ❖ **LOW QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF HUMAN INTERACTION** eg depersonalised environments, practices which greatly limit oral communication, low levels of cognitive, emotional and physical interaction between teachers and students, responding differentially to high and low ability students
- ❖ **LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOPE COMPETENCIES, TO BE WORTHWHILE AND TO BE A CONTRIBUTOR** eg inadequate appreciation and planning for developmental readiness and developmental needs, inappropriate developmental goals, overemphasis on theoretical and academic topics and inadequate curricula, lack of individuation for special needs and insensitivity to individual differences, encouragement and deference to those with natural and well-developed language and quantitative facility in comparison to other talents and strengths, little reinforcement to children whose relative strengths lay in non-verbal areas, overemphasis on acquisition of facts rather than ability to interpret, synthesise, evaluate or apply, demanding that students spend inordinate amounts of time pursuing their areas of greatest weakness.
- ❖ **ENCOURAGEMENT TO BE/REMAIN DEPENDENT** eg students having no responsibility for decision-making of any consequence.

- ❖ DENIAL OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEALTHY RISK-TAKING eg giving students little opportunity to confront their anxieties, emphasis and reward for convergent thinking.

If school systems and their personnel are to be expected to provide the necessary resources to fulfil responsibilities to protect children from emotional abuse certain conditions must exist ie a commitment to the rights of children, an understanding of emotional abuse and its indicators, understanding of child development, competency in applying strategies for positively influencing it and policies, procedures and accountability to reduce emotional abuse and pursue healthy psychological development. Some specific options for intervention are detailed in Table 9.

Table 9

Options for intervention

- ❖ parent support services and training
- ❖ referral to marriage and family counselling
- ❖ lower student to teacher ratios
- ❖ comprehensive psychological evaluation of children suspected to be victims of emotional abuse and individualised educational plans to meet their needs
- ❖ teaching children to identify and assert their rights to fair treatment
- ❖ regular and personalised consultation meetings with teaching staff for the purposes of debriefing, emotional support and ongoing training in regard to meeting their own emotional needs and those of the students in their care.
- ❖ pre and in-service training programmes incorporating a teacher inspired needs analysis eg focussing on constructive expression of anger, effective coping strategies for dealing with psycho-social stressors, identification, effective intervention and follow- up with emotionally abused children, education in more global conceptions of intelligence beyond verbal reasoning and quantitative skills.
- ❖ standardised and well-understood policies and procedures for child abuse whether the inflicting adult is an educator, administrator or parent.

Thank-you for your attention today. I have the utmost respect for the difficulty and complexity of the professional tasks you undertake. I hope I have provided some small assistance in the important work you do with our wonderful little children.