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Child Abuse & Neglect



Editorial

The long-term consequences of childhood emotional maltreatment on development: (Mal)adaptation in adolescence and young adulthood

Over the past 40 years, child maltreatment research has become a demanding, distinct and distinguished field of empirical inquiry. A relative latecomer to this area, child emotional maltreatment has lagged behind other forms of maltreatment in research funding, publishing, and practice (Behl, Conyngham, & May, 2003). Although research on child emotional maltreatment has grown steadily since its formalized introduction to the field 20 years ago (Brassard, Germaine, & Hart, 1987; Cicchetti & Nurcombe, 1991; Garrison, 1987), investigations have focused on childhood effects to the relative exclusion of longer-term, prospective studies with their attendant focus on adolescent and older populations. Studies employing child protection, high risk, and clinical samples have been similarly limited, leaving more questions than answers about the unique, developmental impact and process of child emotional maltreatment.

As part of the effort to address such questions, researchers gathered at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development in April of 2007 to discuss new data about the relation between childhood emotional maltreatment and a variety of long-term (mal)adaptive outcomes in varied samples. This special section of *Child Abuse & Neglect* represents an extension and expansion of these early conversations. While the focus is on youth outcomes, we also consider issues central to definition, identification, and intervention.

In response to recent appeals for greater attention to emotional maltreatment broadly, and to its long-term consequences specifically (e.g., Wright, 2007), these papers illustrate novel and theoretically grounded approaches to understanding *how* and *why* child emotional maltreatment influences (mal)adaptation in adolescence and young adulthood, with a particular eye toward informing practical efforts to decrease emotional maltreatment and/or to mitigate its negative consequences. These papers converge in their emphasis on the need to assess explicitly for emotional maltreatment, both in its own right, and when any other form of maltreatment is queried in research or practice. Yet a vexing issue is how to determine a threshold of emotionally malevolent caregiving – when is bad, bad enough?

Emotional maltreatment may appear in many forms – a physically and/or emotionally uninvolved parent; parents who constantly bicker, yell, undermine and fight with each other in front of the child; perfectionistic parents with unreasonably demanding expectations and critical observations. Other forms of emotional maltreatment reflect discrete acts, such as threatening the child where physical injury potential is high (e.g., hanging a child over a balcony, locking a child out of the home in unsafe conditions), or a pattern of repeated destructive actions (e.g., spurning, terrorizing, isolating, ignoring, exploiting, corrupting, Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Hart & Brassard, 1991). Yet the categorization of emotional abuse and neglect in current child welfare policy is based on a critical, though ambiguously operationalized, threshold of emotional harm. For example, child protection protocols may require behaviors to result in “serious emotional harm;” “imminent danger of suffering irreversible emotional damage;” or child “emotional illness” in order to qualify as emotional maltreatment (e.g., Ontario Risk Assessment Model Eligibility Spectrum, 2006). Meanwhile, it is readily accepted that sexual abuse, physical abuse, and failure to provide life’s physical essentials for a child is emotionally (and developmentally) harmful, and warrants efforts to intervene and protect. In these and other policies, key questions arise: (1) should emotional maltreatment be regarded as its own category? and, its corollary, (2) does emotional maltreatment yield unique impairment to children? These questions become even more challenging when we look forward to consider the potential for enduring effects of child emotional maltreatment on adolescent and young adult functioning.

Adopting a developmental psychopathology perspective, this section addresses the impact of childhood emotional maltreatment on adolescent and young adult adjustment with respect to both psychopathology (e.g., anxiety, depression, dating violence) and competence (e.g., self-esteem, peer relationship quality). The studies herein employ process-level analyses to identify specific mechanisms by which emotional maltreatment influences later adjustment above and beyond its comorbidity with other forms of malevolent caregiving (e.g., physical or sexual abuse). Working from varying perspectives and in

different populations, these authors point to key challenges in the study of child emotional maltreatment as they endeavor to address questions about *when, how, why, under what conditions, and for whom* such experiences prove to be significantly harmful.

Efforts to systematically define and identify child maltreatment have been at the forefront of maltreatment research since its inception (Brassard & Donovan, 2006; Hart, Brassard, Binggeli, & Davidson, 2001). Acknowledging significant gains in the study maltreatment broadly (e.g., Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1993), Trickett and colleagues lead off the section by highlighting ongoing challenges with respect to the definition and identification of child emotional maltreatment, which subsumes several behaviors, each with potentially unique developmental, clinical, and applied implications. For example, while caregiver terrorizing likely provokes an anxiety response and heightened arousal (e.g., impaired self-soothing, exaggerated startle), caregiver spurning/ignoring may elicit a depressive response and decreased arousal (e.g., withdrawal, disengagement). If these response patterns evolve into a child's stylistic responding in the context of chronic emotional maltreatment, different intervention strategies would likely be indicated in terms of both pharmacotherapy (e.g., serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors vs. selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and psychotherapy (e.g., trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy vs. cognitive behavior therapy for depression) (Evans, Foa, Gur, & Hendin, 2005; Wekerle, Miller, Wolfe, & Spindel, 2006).

With respect to key findings, Trickett and colleagues highlight the heretofore unrecognized prevalence of significant child emotional abuse in child protection involved families and encourage greater child welfare and research attention to these experiences. Child emotional maltreatment was associated with a higher frequency of child protection reports and greater levels of overlap across maltreatment subtypes. Moreover, meaningful differences were observed across different categories of emotional maltreatment suggesting that the dominant question in this field should evolve beyond that of, "Does emotional maltreatment affect development?" to "How and why do specific forms of emotional maltreatment yield unique developmental effects?"

To this end, the subsequent studies in this section elucidate the multidimensional nature of emotional maltreatment in an effort to identify unique effects of child emotional maltreatment experiences on adolescent and young adult adaptation. It is important to note that these studies utilize indices of parenting behavior to define specific forms of emotional maltreatment, independent of its impact on the child. As noted by Straus and Field (2003), the injury-based models of identification described earlier prove especially problematic for research aimed at examining the impact of emotional maltreatment on development because they fail to recognize that children may suffer contemporaneous distress, but show overt problems only at later points in development (or not at all). While common in child welfare practice, injury-based identification parameters yield a tautological bind for researchers interested in if and how emotional maltreatment causes injury to children because – by definition – there would be no instances of emotional maltreatment in the absence of injury.

Drawing on a longitudinal, prospective sample of low-income youth, Shaffer and colleagues examine the unique effects of emotionally neglectful, unresponsive and uninvolved parenting (i.e., psychological unavailability) versus hostile, critical, and controlling parenting (i.e., hostility) on psychosocial adaptation in early adolescence. This investigation points to the detrimental effects of both emotional neglect and abuse on later socioemotional competence, and identifies social withdrawal in middle childhood as a possible mechanism accounting for observed relations between emotional abuse and decreased competence in adolescence. The possibility of gender-specific processes emerges in this study as the impact of mother-perpetrated emotional maltreatment appeared to be disproportionately salient for boys' later adjustment relative to that of girls.

The importance of adopting a gendered approach to studying maltreatment-related impairment is echoed in the study by Wekerle and colleagues, which documents the enduring significance of child emotional maltreatment for later relational functioning with respect to teen dating violence. In a large sample of child protection involved youth, these authors find that child emotional maltreatment is associated with heightened levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms and dating violence. Moreover, the observed patterns differed for males and females, with posttraumatic symptoms accounting for relational violence *perpetration* among males and *victimization* among females. The key message here is that there are measurable and unique effects of child emotional maltreatment – in both its abusive and neglectful forms – on adolescent functioning across affective, behavioral and relational domains. In particular, processes involving relationships with the self and others appear to be salient for understanding the negative impact of child emotional maltreatment across domains and across time.

Given the apparent value of concentrating on the relational domain, Wright and colleagues explore the mechanisms underlying the salience of relational processes for understanding the long-term effects of child emotional maltreatment. These authors suggest that internal working models of self and self-in-relation may be salient in both the long-term mediation of emotional maltreatment effects, as well as in their remediation through practice and restorative relationships. Extending our time frame into young adulthood, Wright and colleagues document unique effects of child emotional neglect and abuse on young adult reports of anxiety and depression. Moreover, the relational schemas of shame, vulnerability to harm and self-sacrifice appeared to account for some of these observed relations. Drawing on attachment theory, these authors suggest that repetitive patterns of emotionally unavailable or intrusive-hostile caregiving may undermine core representations of self, others, and self-with-others leading to subsequent psychopathology. Moreover, their findings on relational schemas speak to the promise of a targeted intervention approach to emotional maltreatment-related impairment.

As discussed by Dr. Byron Egeland, this section represents an important step toward expanding and refining our understanding of child emotional maltreatment and its developmental consequences. The authors unanimously call for greater attention to and training in the identification and treatment of emotional maltreatment and its effects, as well as to the

ongoing need for a reciprocal relation between research and practice. These studies have the potential to inform innovative components of practice, while practice (and its careful evaluation) can provide an opportunity to test these ideas and to further explore the questions they raise.

Extant intervention approaches typically focus on overt aspects of maltreatment to the relative exclusion of more subtle exchanges that may typify emotional maltreatment. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of maltreatment-specific interventions have not been scientifically evaluated (Butchart, Harvey, Mian, & Furniss, 2006). The evidence presented here reveals a pressing need to integrate our knowledge of affect regulation, emotional development, emotion literacy, and caregiver sensitivity to yield effective practice guidelines for the assessment and treatment of child emotional maltreatment such that we move beyond dominant paradigms of injury prevention to those that embrace competence and wellness promotion. To this end, the papers herein offer practical suggestions in terms of clinical tools, case management with adolescents, and salient clinical constructs, such as posttraumatic stress symptoms and relational schemas, in working to identify emotional maltreatment and to ameliorate its deleterious consequences.

This special section of *Child Abuse & Neglect* points to the enduring salience of emotional maltreatment for developmental adaptation, as well as to processes that underlie such effects, with the ultimate goal of informing the development and implementation of prevention efforts, practice, and policy. The papers share key features of high caliber research in the form of clear theoretical frameworks, testable hypotheses, and thoughtful interpretation of findings with an eye towards practice implications. We hope this special section extends the growing edge of maltreatment research to inspire others to direct their lenses of empirical inquiry and practice application toward the long-term sequelae of child emotional maltreatment.

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