**Using the Assessment Framework for Emotional Abuse**

**Child’s Developmental Needs**

Health

 Emotional abuse is unlikely to be identified through physical signs and symptoms of ill-health, with the exception of non-organic failure to thrive. Many emotionally abused children appear to be in excellent physical health. Nevertheless, there are some health-related factors.

 There may be signs of self-harm which actually, or will potentially, damage the child’s health. In Doyle’s (1998) study, 14 per cent of the listed children attempted suicide or made serious attempts to harm themselves, including children as young as 6 years old.

 Some research has indicated a substantial link between emotional abuse and eating disorders, anorexia nervosa, bulimia and over-eating.

 Substance misuse may be one way for the child to escape from the harsh realities of emotional abuse and rejection. In some cases parents may provide access to alcohol and drugs.

Education

 Problems with education and schooling appear to be a key feature of emotional abuse. In Glaser et al.’s (2001) study, 25 per cent of listed children were either absent from or persistently late for school. The reasons for non-school attendance vary from children whose truancy was ignored by parents to those who were deliberately kept off school.

 Doyle found 62 per cent of listed school-age children had some education-related problems including vulnerability to bullying by peers or refusal to try anything new because of fear of failure. Glaser et al found substantial rates of educational underachievement in emotionally abused children.

 For those children able to attend school where the educational environment is caring and encouraging, school can provide a good source of resilience.

Identity

 In emotional abuse, especially rejection and denigration, there are substantial risks to the child’s identity and self-esteem.

 Emotionally abused black children face double jeopardy. Racism combined with denigration and abuse in the home are likely to lead to profound negative effects on self-esteem and identity of black, Asian and other children.

Family and Social Relationships

 Families in which emotional abuse occurs are not a homogenous group. The main difference is between those families where one child is singled-out and those where all the children are abused in more or less equal amounts.

 In many of the singled-out situations the families appear to be unexceptional. They might not appear to be subjected to very much stress and other children in the family may well thrive and appear happy and contented. Warm caring relationships are likely to be observed between the parents and other children in the family. Only careful observation will reveal anything amiss. Often clues can be gained from questions about subjects such as the toys children have, their bedroom décor, and parties and presents on birthdays. They will reveal that the singled-out child is being subjected to discrimination and rejection. The cause may be traced back to attachment problems, a significant death or tragedy at the time of the child’s birth or the child representing a hidden part of the family history. For example ‘Luke was conceived while his ‘father’ was away working and was a constant reminder to both parents of his mother’s adultery. His brothers received affection, approval and treats from which he was excluded’ (Doyle, 2001)

 In other families, relationships are relatively chaotic. All the children suffer as the parents show alternating over-concern then indifference. The emotional care of the children is inconsistent and ambivalent. Often they are left with ever-changing, temporary carers. Relationships between the parents and extended family members are fraught, while relationships with neighbours, friends and professionals tend to be polarised. In such families care has to be taken not to confuse the scapegoating of one child in this situation with the singled-out child described above where alleviation of the difficulties or the removal of the child will often lead to a noticeable improvement in family functioning. In the family with chaotic and generally ambivalent relationships, removal of the scapegoat will simply lead to the production of a new family scapegoat.

 In marked contrast, are those families characterised by rigid, inflexible relationships. Here the parents appear to be fearful of losing control. Professionals are regarded with suspicion, and interference in family life is hugely resented. All the children are subjected to a punitive, oppressive regime in the home.

 Finally, there are families that may appear unexceptional but which contain a seriously damaged individual in a position of power. Often this person is a parent but in some families might be a grandparent or an elder sibling. This figure is more often seen in sexual abuse cases but can be apparent in families where there appears to be no sexual exploitation (although this should be carefully considered). Often the damaged individual is a bully, skilled at manipulating relationships and may well present as charming, plausible and eloquent. Frequently professionals find it difficult to evidence or articulate their concerns about these people.

 These distinctions in family relationships should not be used as rigid classifications but are however, helpful guides to understanding and assessing the general patterns of social and family relationships.

Social Presentation

 Many emotionally abused children show no particular difficulties with social presentation. However, there are some possible indicators.

 Singled-out children may appear to be more shabbily dressed, more withdrawn or attention seeking, and less confident than their siblings. However, care is needed as some of these may be simply related to a child’s different temperament.

 Professionals should also be alert to children who are too well behaved, too tidy and too meticulous about their appearance. E.g. a school was alerted to problems because of the extreme distress a young girl showed if her shoes became scuffed, if her clothes became slightly marked or if she lost a hair ribbon.

Emotional and Behavioural Development

 Emotional abuse almost by definition is likely to have an adverse impact on emotional development. Children are likely to feel unsafe and insecure. In Doyle’s (1998) study ‘fear inducing’ behaviour was present in 95 per cent of listed cases, while 71 per cent of emotional abuse survivors said they were made to feel insecure.

 Insecurity almost inevitably means that emotionally abused children do not develop a strong sense of belonging. In addition, passive or active rejection and ignoring further compound the children’s feelings that they are unlovable. Emotionally abused children are therefore likely to have very low self-esteem and feelings of self-loathing.

Self-Care Skills

 Emotional abuse may not adversely affect self-care skills, although children who have over-developed care skills may be emotionally abused, as in the case of the 6 year old girl who had to clean herself up when she was sick or wet. Similarly, like the 8 year old boy who could not even wipe his bottom, lack of self-care skills in an able child suggests over-protection.

**Parenting Capacity**

Basic Care

 Emotional abuse may be combined with physical neglect but in those cases where emotional abuse is the sole form there may be no problems with basic physical care. However, there may be subtle clues in the basic care which indicate emotional abuse such as ‘mechanical’ care which is efficient but devoid of pleasure and playfulness or where the care is almost too good and children appear to be fashion mannequins or their home is too clean or too tidy.

Ensuring Safety and Stability

 Putting children in situations where they feel unsafe, such as with unsuitable carers who may be strangers to the child. Deliberately telling children frightening stories, or allowing/making them watch horror/violent films. Putting children to bed in the dark when they are afraid. Exposing children to things the parent knows will frighten the child such as spiders.

 An over-protective parent can also convey fear to a child, fear that the outside world is a totally dangerous place to be. This parent is also damaging the child’s self-esteem because the message being conveyed is ‘you cannot be trusted to look after yourself’.

Emotional Warmth

 In cases of over-protection parents are not cold and critical but very much the opposite, however the cloying entrapment of an overpoweringly protective and morbidly anxious parent can be every bit as abusive as cold criticism.

 Workers will also need to take account of cultural issues/differences in the expression of emotional warmth when undertaking assessments. Some parents who are brought up to be tough and not to express emotion may be caring but distant from their children.

Stimulation

 With children who are ignored and rejected there may be no attempt to stimulate them or help them develop cognitively.

Guidance and Boundaries

 Often in emotionally abusive families there is either a lack of boundaries and guidance or very rigid and overly strict boundaries. In rigid families rather than guidance there are a series of edicts and commands.

**Family and Environmental Factors**

Family History and Functioning and Wider Family

 Abuse in the background of the parents can be an important factor.

Doyle’s study showed that 88 per cent of the mothers and 77 per cent of the fathers had suffered at least one form of abuse during their childhood. The study also showed that often in cases of emotional abuse both parents are emotionally unavailable.

 In terms of the wider family, Doyle’s study found that grandparents were frequently so involved with the dynamics of the family or so distant that they were rarely a source of help for the victims.

Family’s Social Integration and Community Resources

 Social isolation is a key component of emotional abuse. Doyle’s study found that nearly half of the families where children were on the child protection list had little constructive social support. In many of the cases isolation was due to the family moving to a new community, for others community supports were alienating or inadequate.

 Social isolation can also be due to the fact that the key adults in the family have profound problems with relationships. Their ambivalence and inconsistency towards the children is mirrored in their relationships with other adults including voluntary or professional helpers.

Assessment Tools

The following tools may be helpful to the identification/assessment of emotional abuse:

 Genogram/family tree – to establish family histories, alliances, conflicts etc.

 Establish parents/children’s relationships within the community. This can highlight possible sources of resilience for children and determine whether parents are isolated within the community and the possible reasons for this.

 Self-esteem checklists/questionnaires for parents and children.

 Scales and Questionnaires (Assessment Framework)

 Attachment checklists.

 Chronologies.

 Assessing Parental Motivation to change.

References

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