

## **Psychological Maltreatment Definition and Forms**

Psychological maltreatment is defined as *a repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior* that thwart the child's basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey that the child is worthless, defective, damaged, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another's needs, and/or expendable.

SPURNING embodies verbal and nonverbal caregiver acts that reject and degrade a child, and includes the following:

- ◆ belittling, degrading and other nonphysical forms of hostile or rejecting treatment;
- ◆ belittling, degrading and other forms of hostile or rejecting treatment of those in significant relationships with the child such as parents, siblings, extended kin;
- ◆ shaming and/or ridiculing the child, including the child's physical, psychological and behavioral characteristics, such as showing the normal emotions of affection, grief, anger, or sorrow;
- ◆ consistently singling out the child to criticize and punish, to perform most of the household chores, or to receive fewer rewards;
- ◆ humiliation, especially when in public;
- ◆ any other physical abuse, physical neglect, or sexual abuse that also involves spurning the child such as telling the child that s/he is dirty or damaged due to or deserving sexual abuse; berating the child while beating him/her; telling the child that s/he doesn't deserve to have his or her basic needs met.

EXPLOITING/CORRUPTING: caregiver acts that encourage the child to develop inappropriate behaviors and attitudes (self-destructive, antisocial, criminal, deviant, or other maladaptive behaviors). While these two categories are conceptually distinct, they are not empirically distinguishable, and thus, they are described as a combined subtype.

EXPLOITING/CORRUPTING includes the following:

- ◆ modeling, permitting, or encouraging antisocial behavior (e.g., prostitution, performance in pornographic media, criminal activities, substance abuse, violence to or corruption of others);
- ◆ modeling, permitting, or encouraging betraying the trust of or being cruel to another person;
- ◆ restricting or interfering with or directly undermining the child's important relationships (e.g., restricting a child's communication with his/her other parent and telling the child the lack of communication is due to the other parent's lack of love for the child);
- ◆ modeling, permitting, or encouraging developmentally inappropriate behavior (e.g., parentification, adultification, infantilization, living the parent's dreams);
- ◆ coercing the child's submission through extreme over-involvement, intrusiveness, or dominance, allowing little or no opportunity or support for child's views, feelings, and wishes; micromanaging child's life, and/or manipulation (e.g., inducing guilt, fostering

anxiety, threatening withdrawal of love, placing a child in a double bind in which the child is doomed to fail or disappoint, or disorienting the child by stating something is true (or false) when it patently is not);

- ◆ restricting, interfering with or directly undermining the child's development in cognitive, social, affective/emotional, physical or conative/volitional (i.e., acting from emotion and thinking; choosing, exercising will) domains, including Caregiver Fabricated Illness also known as medical child abuse, which has multiple psychological as well as physical components;
- ◆ any other physical abuse, physical neglect, or sexual abuse that also involves exploiting/corrupting the child (such as incest and sexual grooming of the child).

TERRORIZING embodies caregiver behavior that threatens or is likely to physically hurt, kill, abandon, or place the child or child's loved ones/objects in recognizably dangerous or frightening situations, and includes. TERRORIZING includes the following:

- ◆ subjecting a child to frightening or chaotic circumstances;
- ◆ placing a child in recognizably dangerous situations;
- ◆ threatening to abandon or abandoning the child;
- ◆ setting rigid or unrealistic expectations with threat of loss, harm, or danger if they are not met;
- ◆ threatening or perpetrating violence (which is also physical abuse) against the child;
- ◆ threatening or perpetrating violence against a child's loved ones or objects, including domestic/intimate partner violence observable by the child;
- ◆ placing the child in a loyalty conflict by making the child unnecessarily choose to have a relationship with one parent or the other;
- ◆ preventing a child from having access to needed food, light, water, or access to the toilet;
- ◆ preventing a child from needed sleep, relaxing, or resting;
- ◆ any other acts of physical abuse, physical neglect, or sexual abuse that also involve terrorizing the child (such as forced intercourse; beatings and mutilations; and denying the child opportunities to attend to basic needs such as for food, water, and sleep).

EMOTIONAL UNRESPONSIVENESS embodies caregiver acts that ignore the child's attempts and needs to interact (failing to express affection, caring, and love for the child) and showing little or no emotion in interactions with the child. EMOTIONAL

UNRESPONSIVENESS includes the following:

- ◆ being detached and uninvolved through either incapacity or lack of motivation;
- ◆ interacting only when absolutely necessary;
- ◆ failing to express warmth, affection, caring, concern, and love for the child.
- ◆ being emotionally detached and inattentive to the child's needs to be safe and secure such as failing to detect a child's victimization by others or failing to attend to the child's basic needs;
- ◆ any other physical abuse, physical neglect, or sexual abuse that also involves emotional unresponsiveness.

ISOLATING embodies caregiver acts that consistently and unreasonably deny the child opportunities to meet needs for interacting/communicating with peers or adults inside or

outside the home. ISOLATING includes the following:

- ◆ confining the child or placing unreasonable limitations on the child's freedom of movement within his/her environment;
- ◆ placing unreasonable limitations or restrictions on social interactions with family members, peers or adults in the community;
- ◆ any other physical abuse, physical neglect, or sexual abuse that also involves isolating the child such as preventing the child from social interaction with peers because of the poor physical condition or interpersonal climate of the home.

MENTAL HEALTH, MEDICAL, AND EDUCATIONAL NEGLECT embodies caregiver acts that ignore, refuse to allow, or fail to provide the necessary treatment for the mental health, medical, and educational problems or needs for the child. MENTAL HEALTH, MEDICAL, AND EDUCATIONAL NEGLECT includes the following:

- ◆ ignoring the need for, failing to, or refusing to allow or provide treatment for serious emotional/behavioral problems or needs of the child
- ◆ ignoring the need for, failing to, or refusing to allow or provide treatment for serious physical health problems or needs of the child;
- ◆ ignoring the need for, failing to, or refusing or allow or provide treatment for services for serious educational problems or needs of the child
- ◆ any other physical abuse, physical neglect, or sexual abuse that also involve mental health, medical, or educational neglect of the child.

Source: Hart, S. N., & Brassard, M. R. (1991, 2001). *Definition of psychological maltreatment*. Indianapolis: Office for the Study of the Psychological Rights of the Child; Indiana University School of Education. Revised by Hart, Brassard, Baker, & Chiel, 2016.