

Loving Our Children: Finding What Works for First Nations Families

Canada Research Chair in First Nations Child and Family Services
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Information Sheet #12

What is Emotional Maltreatment?

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According to the First Nations/Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (FN/CIS-2019),² emotional maltreatment is the primary concern in 9.4% of substantiated maltreatment investigations involving First Nations children. In another 13.6% of substantiated maltreatment investigations, emotional maltreatment is identified as a secondary or tertiary concern. The FN/CIS-2019 defines emotional maltreatment as including the following:

- 1 Terrorizing or threat of violence:** A climate of fear, placing the child in unpredictable or chaotic circumstances, bullying or frightening a child or making threats of violence against the child or the child's loved ones or objects.
- 2 Verbal abuse or belittling:** Non-physical forms of overtly hostile or rejecting treatment. Shaming or ridiculing the child or belittling and degrading the child.
- 3 Isolation/confinement:** Adult cuts the child off from normal social experiences, prevents friendships or makes the child believe that he or she is alone in the world. Includes locking a child in a room or isolating the child from the normal household routines.
- 4 Inadequate nurturing or affection:** Through acts of omission, does not provide adequate nurturing or affection.

This information sheet is [one in a series](#)¹ about child welfare, written for First Nations developing child and family prevention services as part of the systemic reform underway across Canada.

Being detached and uninvolved or failing to express affection, caring and love and interacting only when absolutely necessary.

- 5 Exploiting or corrupting behaviour:** The adult permits or encourages the child to engage in destructive, criminal, antisocial or deviant behaviour.
- 6 Alienating the other parent:** Parent's behaviour signals to the child that it is not acceptable to have a loving relationship with the other parent or one parent actively isolates the other parent from the child. (E.g., the parent gets angry with the child when he/she spends time with the other parent; the parent limits contact between the child and the other parent; the parent inappropriately confides in the child about matters regarding the parents' relationship, financial situation, etc.)

In some jurisdictions, exposure to intimate partner violence is also classified as a form of emotional maltreatment, however the FN/CIS-2019 tracks these situations separately. (See [What is Children's Exposure to Intimate Partner Violence?](#)³)

Emotional Harm

"Sticks and stones can break my bones but words..." can hurt even more! Like physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect, emotional maltreatment can have long-lasting negative effects on children's emotional, cognitive, spiritual and social development. In many respects, it is the emotional aspects of all forms of maltreatment that are particularly harmful to children's development. Some type of immediate emotional harm is noted in 35% of cases of substantiated maltreatment in the FN/CIS-2019, and more than half of these cases are considered to be severe enough to require some type of treatment. Rates of documented emotional harm are higher in cases of substantiated emotional maltreatment (i.e., 57%), although in 43% of cases of substantiated emotional maltreatment, no immediate emotional harm is noted by the investigation. It is likely, however, that some of these asymptomatic children will develop emotional problems in the long term.

What is the Difference Between Emotional Maltreatment and Poor Parenting?

Other than some of the most egregious forms of emotional abuse, drawing the line between

emotional maltreatment and poor parenting can be challenging. Some researchers focus on severity and chronicity and define emotional maltreatment as "a repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behaviour that thwart the child's basic psychological needs."⁴ Concern about drawing this distinction may, however, be a function of a child protection system that is focused on investigating and blaming. In contrast, prevention-oriented approaches focus on finding ways to improve parenting and support children and families.

Prevention and Intervention Programs

Although there is limited evaluation research on interventions specifically designed to address emotional maltreatment, many child maltreatment prevention and family support programs address factors associated with emotional maltreatment and its effects on children.⁵ Parent support programs can promote positive, secure and trusting parent-child interactions and improve negative parenting dynamics. Mental health and substance misuse programs are essential for parents who, due to their own unmet needs, struggle to attend to their children's needs. Broader structural interventions that address poverty and housing problems can also help reduce stressors that interfere with parenting capacity.

If you would like to share information about a First Nations child and family support initiative in your community, the Loving Our Children project researchers would like to hear from you. LOCwhatworks@gmail.com

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://cwrp.ca/loving-our-children>
- 2 Fallon, B., Lefebvre, R., Trocmé, N., Richard, K., Hélie, S., Montgomery, M., Bennett, M., Joh-Carnella, N., Saint-Girons, M., Filippelli, J., MacLaurin, B., Black, T., Esposito, T., King, B., Collin-Vézina, D., Dallaire, R., Gray, R., Levi, J., Orr, M., ... Soop, S. (2021). *Denouncing the continued overrepresentation of First Nations children in Canadian child welfare: Findings from the First Nations/Canadian incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect-2019*. Ontario: Assembly of First Nations. <https://cwrp.ca/publications/denouncing-continued-overrepresentation-first-nations-children-canadian-child-welfare>
- 3 <https://cwrp.ca/publications/what-childrens-exposure-intimate-partner-violence>
- 4 Hart, S., Brassard, M. & Wernham, M. (2022). Psychological maltreatment: A threat to children not to be ignored. In R. D. Krugman, J. E. Korbin (Eds.), *Handbook of child maltreatment* (pp. 165–180). Child Maltreatment, vol 14. Springer, Cham. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-82479-2_4
- 5 Ibid.

