



Detecting psychological maltreatment

Blows to the head and the heart...¹

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What is psychological maltreatment? What are its characteristics and how can it be recognized? There are a lot of unanswered questions in this area, but recently some Quebec-based researchers have examined how psychological maltreatment affects children, what its effects are and, above all, how it can best be detected. Perhaps the best place to begin to understand psychological maltreatment is with a common definition:

Acts of omission and commission which are judged on the basis of a combination of community standards and professional expertise to be psychologically damaging. Such acts are committed by individuals, singly or collectively, who by their characteristics (e.g., age, status, knowledge, organizational form) are in a position of power that renders a child vulnerable. Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioural, affective or physical functioning of the child.²

An insidious but very real problem

Psychological maltreatment of children is generally considered to include humiliating, terrorizing, exploiting, isolating, ignoring and exposure to domestic violence. Very few studies have looked at all of these at once. Studies conducted in Quebec on the prevalence of violent parental behaviours indicate that 78.6% of parents interviewed had verbally abused their children at least once in the 12 months preceding the survey. Also, it appears that in 44% of cases, episodes of verbal abuse recurred three or more times during the year preceding the survey.³ And according to some estimates, more than 60% of the child protection reports made in Montreal and its suburbs relate to parental neglect; of these, 60% actually involve emotional neglect.⁴

A proven tool

To better detect maltreatment and to support intervention, a psychological maltreatment risk assessment guide has been developed.⁵ Researchers and child welfare practitioners, building on earlier studies of the issue, worked together over two years to complete the guide. Up to now, ensuring the validity of the tool has focused on selecting relevant content, adding related information, choosing a user-friendly format, testing the tool's value on real caseloads, developing training, and more thoroughly checking the tool's usefulness with the help of trained caseworkers. Subsequently, focus groups were used to improve the guide and better adapt it to the real situations facing caseworkers. Knowledge transfer activities are now being held for caseworkers, who could be provided with training at health and social service institutions.

The guide is simple and provides carefully chosen information to help caseworkers evaluate situations that could lead to psychological maltreatment of children. Essentially, the guide is made up of two parts, also called *doors*. The first door is concerned with evaluating the risk of psychological maltreatment on the basis of family profiles that have been established through past research.⁶ To be precise, five family profiles are described therein: the Ugly Duckling, the King and his Kingdom, the Mother Superior, the Broken Parent, and the Crossfire. Each of these profiles shows the type of functioning that prevails in the family: the ambient climate, the roles played by the father, the mother (or their substitutes) and the children. In a given family, each profile may be absent (degree 0), partially present (degree 1) or fully present (degree 2).

The second door helps caseworkers to detect psychological maltreatment on the basis of interactions between the parents and the child in a disciplinary context.⁷ Some salient aspects of the interactive dynamic of conflict situations give indications of each person's cognitive and emotional characteristics and may reveal a risk of psychological maltreatment. In particular, three risky interactive dynamics are identified: The Authoritarian Parent and the Obedient Child; The Powerless Parent and the Problem Child; and The Raging Parent and the Yo-Yo Child. Another interactive dynamic, The Exemplary Parent and the Assertive Child, is unlikely to lead to maltreatment, but certainly there is conflict between the child and the parent; however, it is resolved peacefully and without damage.

An evolving guide

A number of appendices are included at the end of the guide to give structure to the detection procedure and make the caseworker's job easier. The appendices contain suggested interview questions, tally sheets, illustrations of family profiles and examples of psychological maltreatment, a list of criteria for evaluating the seriousness of the situations detected, and hints on how caseworkers should proceed.

The guide is no substitute, of course, for caseworkers' clinical judgement. Rather, it is intended as an observation window to help in effective detection. What is contributed by this new tool is a flexible evaluation framework that may be used repeatedly and in several different contexts. Over time, as caseworkers gain experience, the guide will be enriched with additional scenarios of psychological maltreatment of children, thus helping to promote their healthy development.

- 1 This information sheet was peer reviewed by experts in the field of child welfare.
- 2 Hart, S.N., Germain, R. B., & Brassard, M. R. (1987). The Challenge to Understand and Combat Psychological Maltreatment of Children and Youth. In M.R. Brassard, R. Germain, & S. N. Hart (Eds.), *Psychological Maltreatment of Children and Youth* (pp. 3–24). New York: Pergamon Press.
- 3 Institut de la statistique du Québec (2000). *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec*. Québec, QC, Canada: Les publications du Québec.
- 4 Mayer-Renaud, M. (1990). *Le phénomène de la négligence*. Montreal, QC, Canada: Centre de services sociaux du Montréal métropolitain.
- 5 Malo C., & Gagné, M.-H. (2002). *Guide de soutien à l'évaluation du risque de mauvais traitements psychologiques envers les enfants*. Montreal, QC, Canada: Institut pour le développement social des jeunes and Centre jeunesse de Montréal-Institut universitaire.
- 6 Gagné, M.-H. (1999). *Envisager, définir et comprendre la violence psychologique faite aux enfants en milieu familial*. Doctoral dissertation, Psychology Department, Université du Québec à Montréal.
- 7 Malo, C., Moreau, J., Chamberland, C., Roy, C., Léveillé, S., & Bauvais, B. (2000). *Étude exploratoire des manifestations de mauvais traitements psychologiques chez de jeunes parents « à risque » avec leur enfant d'âge préscolaire*. Montreal, QC, Canada: Institut de recherche pour le développement social des jeunes.

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