



Child Emotional Maltreatment in Canada¹

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The Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003) is the second nation-wide study to examine the incidence of reported child maltreatment and the characteristics of the children and families investigated by Canadian child welfare services. The CIS-2003 tracked a sample of 14,200 child maltreatment investigations,² which served as a basis for deriving national estimates. Information was collected directly from the investigating child welfare workers using a standard set of definitions.³ This Information Sheet describes cases of emotional maltreatment that were tracked by the CIS-2003 in Canada, excluding Quebec.⁴

Emotional maltreatment

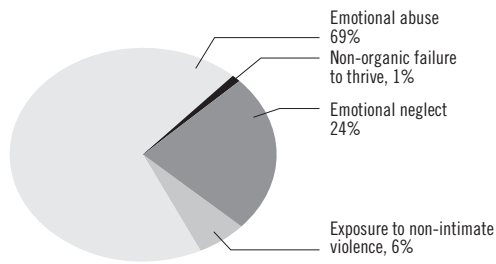
Emotional maltreatment is complex and problematic to document because it does not necessarily involve specific incidents or visible injuries. The effects of emotional maltreatment, although often severe, tend to become apparent over time. Provincial and territorial child welfare statutes vary considerably in the extent to which they cover emotional maltreatment. The forms of emotional maltreatment tracked by the CIS-2003 include:

- **Emotional abuse:** child has suffered or was at substantial risk of suffering from mental, emotional, or developmental problems caused by overly hostile, punitive treatment, or habitual or extreme verbal abuse. If treatment was offered but caregiver(s) did not cooperate, the cases were classified under neglect (failure to provide treatment) as well.

- **Non-organic failure to thrive:** child under 3 has suffered a marked retardation or cessation of growth for which no organic reason can be identified. Failure to thrive cases where inadequate nutrition was the identified cause were classified as physical neglect. Non-organic failure to thrive is generally considered to be a form of psychological maltreatment; it has been classified as a separate category because of its particular characteristics.
- **Emotional neglect:** child has suffered or was at substantial risk of suffering from mental, emotional, or developmental problems caused by inadequate nurturance/affection. If treatment was offered but caregivers were not cooperative, cases were classified under failure to provide treatment as well.
- **Exposure to non-intimate violence (between adults other than caregivers):** This fourth form of emotional maltreatment was added after the start of the study to deal with the relatively large number of such investigations. This category included children who were witnesses of violence between adults in the home environment (for example, between the child's father and an acquaintance), excluding domestic violence.

An estimated 12.59 investigations per 1,000 children in 2003 involved alleged emotional maltreatment as the primary or secondary form of maltreatment. Emotional maltreatment was substantiated in 42% of cases, suspected in 24% and unsubstantiated in 33%. Of the substantiated cases, 69% included emotional abuse, 24% emotional neglect, 6% exposure to non-intimate violence, and 1% non-organic failure to thrive (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Primary or secondary forms of substantiated maltreatments (CIS-2003)
Estimates based on a sample of 3,248 child maltreatment investigations



Source: CIS-2003 Major Findings, Table 3-8.

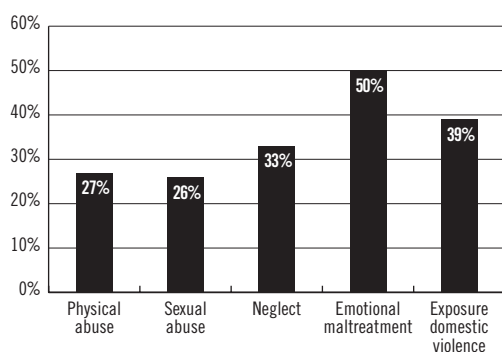
Emotional harm

Emotional harm that had occurred after the maltreatment incident was identified in 35% of investigations where substantiated emotional maltreatment was the primary concern, and was sufficiently severe to require treatment in 25% of cases.⁵ Although no emotional harm was documented in the remaining 65% of substantiated emotional maltreatment cases, it is important to understand that the determination of emotional maltreatment could be based on parental behaviour and/or the child's symptoms.

Duration

Of all cases involving emotional maltreatment as the primary category of substantiated maltreatment, 21% involved a single incident, 17% involved incidents over a period of less than six months and 50% occurred over a period of more than six months. Of all categories of substantiated maltreatment, emotional maltreatment is the one that has the highest proportion of cases for which the victimization lasted for more than six months (27% for physical abuse, 26% for sexual abuse, 33% for neglect, and 39% for exposure to domestic violence) (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Duration (six months and over) of maltreatment by category of substantiated maltreatment (CIS-2003)
Estimates based on a sample of 5,642 child maltreatment investigations



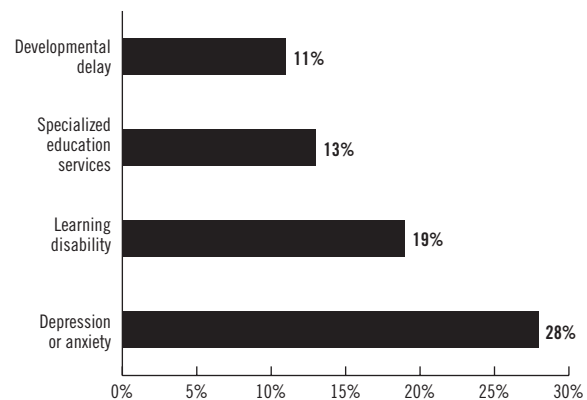
Source: CIS-2003 Major Findings, Table 4-3.

Child Functioning

Child functioning was documented using a checklist of problems that child welfare workers were likely to discover through their investigations. Workers were asked to indicate problems that had been confirmed by a formal diagnosis and/or directly observed, and suspected problems that could not be fully verified during the investigations. The six-month period before the investigation was used as a reference point.

Physical, emotional, or cognitive health issues were reported in 43% of substantiated emotional maltreatment cases. This percentage is slightly higher than that identified for other categories of substantiated maltreatment (38% for physical abuse, 35% for sexual abuse, 38% for neglect, and 21% for exposure to domestic violence). The most frequently occurring physical, emotional, or cognitive child functioning issues for substantiated emotional maltreatment were depression or anxiety (28%; an estimated 4,233 child investigations), learning disability (19%; 2,967 investigations), specialized education services (13%; 1,915 investigations), and developmental delay (11%; 1,640 investigations) (see Figure 3).

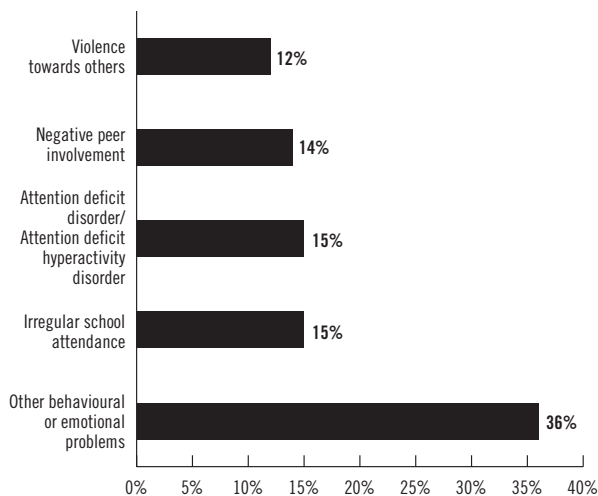
Figure 3: Most common child functioning (physical, emotional, or cognitive) issues in cases of substantiated emotional maltreatment (CIS-2003)
Estimates based on a sample of 5,660 child maltreatment investigations



Source: CIS-2003 Major Findings, Table 6-4(a).

Behavioural issues were indicated in 49% of substantiated emotional maltreatment investigations compared with 52% for physical abuse, 45% for sexual abuse, 44% for neglect, and 22% for exposure to domestic violence. The most frequently occurring behavioural child functioning issues for substantiated emotional maltreatment were attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (15%; an estimated 2,312 child investigations), irregular school attendance (15%; 2,282 investigations), negative peer involvement (14%; 2,143 investigations), and violence towards others (12%; 1,894 investigations) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Most frequent child functioning (behavioural) issues in cases of substantiated emotional maltreatment (CIS-2003)
Estimates based on a sample of 5,660 child maltreatment investigations



Source: CIS-2003 Major Findings, Table 6-4(b).

- 1 This information sheet is based on the peer-reviewed report, Trocmé, N., Fallon, B., MacLaurin, B., Daciuk, J., Felstiner, C., Black, T., et al. (2005). *Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect-2003: Major Findings*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.
- 2 The CIS does not track incidents that were not reported to child welfare services, reported cases that were screened out by child welfare services before being fully investigated, new reports on cases already opened by child welfare services, and cases that were investigated only by the police.
- 3 In Quebec, information was extracted directly from the administrative information systems.
- 4 National estimates including Quebec are excluded from this information sheet because of incomplete or unavailable data. Where available, estimates including Quebec can be obtained from the CIS-2003 Major Findings report.
- 5 See CIS-2003 Major Findings Report, Table 4-2.

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