



Psychological abuse: Children's invisible suffering¹

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Maybe you know Alex, Esther, or Ryan, or children like them.

They are victims of psychological abuse and don't feel good about themselves. Although psychological abuse leaves no physical scars, it shakes children's feelings of security and disrupts their development. If Alex, Esther, or Ryan is reported to child welfare authorities for suspected physical abuse or neglect, caseworkers will be aware that the child may also be a victim of psychological abuse. Prevention involves working to help these children grow up feeling good about themselves.

Psychological abuse: Invisible, diffuse, but cause for concern

When child welfare workers started to look at psychological abuse, what was once invisible became visible and very disturbing. In Quebec, psychological abuse was noted in one child out of every four reported for maltreatment. The vast majority of these children also suffer other forms of maltreatment.

In Canada, according to child welfare statistics, an estimated 3.6 children out of 1,000 are psychologically abused.² Given that many children are not reported, this figure is clearly underestimate.

Protecting children from psychological abuse

In Quebec, as in most of the other provinces, psychological abuse of children is not covered by child protection legislation. However, Quebec's Youth Protection Act does cover a number of situations that indirectly refer to psychological abuse.

Psychological abuse of children is probably the most common form of maltreatment within the family.

Psychological abuse: What is it?

One of the reasons psychological abuse is often ignored is that there is no single clear and generally accepted definition. Defining this form of abuse must rely on judgement, cultural norms, and values. Each of us has an idea of what is acceptable and what is not.

In their study, Chamberland et al. (in press)¹ distinguish between direct and indirect psychological abuse.

- The types of direct abuse examined in the study are threats of abuse/terrorizing, rejection/denigration/disapproval, and emotional indifference/ignoring.
- Exposure to domestic violence is the only type of indirect psychological abuse considered.

Psychologically abused children: Results of a Quebec youth centre field study

The study by Chamberland et al. (in press),¹ based on data gathered in the 1998 Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment and Serious Behavioural Problems (QIS), seeks to:

- understand and assess the scope of the various forms of psychological abuse;
- describe the characteristics of children reported to child welfare authorities and their families;
- examine what decisions were made after investigation of the report.

The group of children for whom caseworkers identified psychological abuse was compared with the group of children for whom caseworkers did not identify psychological abuse.

Children and parents: General picture in figures

- A total of 1,032 children, or 21.6% of the 4,774 children under the age of 18 investigated by the youth protection services during the QIS's three months of data collection, were victims of psychological abuse.
- 45.5% were victims of direct psychological abuse and 41% witnessed domestic violence (indirect psychological abuse).
- Mothers were more often named as those involved in the more direct forms of abuse, while fathers were more often named as involved in domestic violence.

Parents victimized as children

- Information on maltreatment suffered by the parents in childhood was available for 674 children, or 65% of the group of 1,032 identified as victims of psychological abuse. More than three quarters of the children of this subgroup (76%) were living with a father or mother who had been the victim of abuse, neglect, or abandonment as a child. In 17.4% of cases, both parents had been maltreated as children.

Psychological abuse of children: Some figures

- 53% of children were exposed to domestic violence.
- 31% of children were victims of rejection, denigration, or disapproval.
- 22% suffered from the emotional indifference of their parents or were ignored by them.
- 17% were threatened with abuse or terrorized.

Psychological abuse frequently associated with other forms of maltreatment

Children who are psychologically abused are often exposed to other forms of maltreatment. The caseworkers report:

- neglect in 52.2% of cases;
- physical abuse in 35% of cases;
- abandonment in 10% of cases;
- sexual abuse in 7% of cases.

Impact on children's mental health and emotional well-being

When we examine a complex phenomenon, it is usually impossible to establish a simple cause-and-effect relationship. So there is rarely a simple relationship between an act of violence and its consequences. This is even truer in cases of psychological abuse, which is often associated with other forms of maltreatment. Yet researchers have observed that:

- Children who are victims of psychological abuse experience more emotional problems than children who are not victims of this type of maltreatment. Those who are victims of direct psychological abuse are more affected: more socially withdrawn, depressed, insecure, and much more likely to engage in behaviour that puts their safety at risk.
- A large number of children who are psychologically abused or neglected have serious behavioural problems (32%).
- A greater proportion of children who witness domestic violence are anxious and insecure than those who do not.

Difficult family living conditions: Some figures

Children who are victims of psychological abuse live in families grappling with many problems:

- 56% of families are struggling with substance abuse.
- 55% of families are in a precarious economic situation: one or both parents are on welfare or employment insurance.
- Parents in 46% of families are separated or divorced.
- There are mental health problems in 41% of families.
- 37.5% of families are socially isolated.
- Criminal activities are reported for 26% of families.
- Physical health problems are reported for 17% of families.
- Intellectual disability is reported for 5% of families.
- Single-parent or blended families are over-represented, compared with the general population.

What happens when psychological abuse is identified by child welfare authorities?

Assessing children's risk

In 91% of cases, psychological abuse is noted along with other forms of maltreatment that are grounds for protection. The overall context of the maltreatment experienced by the child is also a cause of great concern, as the situation is often very serious.

Interesting observations on decisions made and services recommended

- A greater number of children who are victims of psychological abuse are found among those monitored by child welfare authorities or taken into care. Given that these children often also suffer from other forms of maltreatment, their cases are more serious and their development is jeopardized to a greater extent.
- The services recommended to children in families in which psychological abuse has been identified are external services (recreation, medical care, or psychological treatment) (59% of cases) and internal services of youth centres (56%).
- 84% of services recommended to parents are chiefly external (parenting education, family assistance, medical care, or psychological treatment).
- Follow-up by social workers is the internal service most frequently recommended to parents (63%).

Domestic violence and children: Indirect psychological abuse³

To children, domestic violence is a form of indirect psychological abuse. When the family setting is violent, children feel physically threatened. They feel emotionally insecure, and the climate of violence undermines access to the inner stability that gradually develops in children who benefit from a suitable family environment. It is hard to see someone you love being maltreated, just as it is hard to see someone you love being violent.

The Quebec data gathered as part of the QIS show that in families in which domestic violence is a problem, children's exposure to such violence was identified as maltreatment in only 27% of cases. That means that domestic violence is not automatically deemed to endanger the child within the meaning of the Youth Protection Act. Furthermore, children for whom domestic violence is identified as psychological abuse are generally younger.

It is also important to note that 59% of children exposed to domestic violence live in families with five or more psychological or social problems (poverty, substance abuse, marital breakdown, social isolation, mental health problems, and so on).⁴

Some Figures

Children from families in which domestic violence has been identified often experience several forms of maltreatment:

- neglect, especially "failure to protect the child from potential physical harm," for 42.1% of children;
- direct psychological abuse for 36.5% of children;
- physical abuse for 18.2% of children.

Working with children and families: Meeting the challenge of helping individuals and the community

Taking a new look at the question of the psychological abuse of children is like opening Pandora's box to find the poorest of poor families, under stress and vulnerable. At the same time, several forms of maltreatment are uncovered and children whose development is even greater jeopardy.

Psychologically abused children are very often victims of other forms of maltreatment. These situations are common: a terrified or rejected child is often the victim of physical abuse; a child who is ignored or exposed to domestic violence is often neglected.

The research results presented here show that caseworkers asked to estimate the incidence and scope of psychological abuse and take the pulse of the families concerned suggested a diverse array of specialized and other services. Traditional psychotherapy and social work services alone cannot help these families and protect the children.

In 91% of cases, psychological abuse is identified along with other forms of maltreatment. The situation of these children is a cause of great concern.

Psychological abuse is an emerging issue in the field of child protection. Over the past two decades, the concept of protection has shifted towards a real recognition of the major adverse effects of maltreatment on child development. While protecting children's physical safety is still a priority, increasing attention is being given to protecting social, emotional, and cognitive development. For the sake of children's welfare and protection, child welfare agencies are being called upon to develop expertise in many different spheres of the lives of children and families, through a better understanding of neglect, exposure to domestic violence, and psychological abuse.

Quebec Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse, Neglect, Abandonment and Serious Behavioural Problems

The QIS report can be ordered by telephone or using a form available from the Centre jeunesse de Montréal Website.

Website: www.mtl.centresjeunesse.qc.ca/bibliotheque/pdf/bon_commande.pdf

Telephone: 514-896-3396

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- 1 This information sheet is based on the peer-reviewed article, Chamberland, C., Laporte, L., Lavergne, C., Tourigny, M., Mayer, M., Hélie, S., et al. (in press). Psychological maltreatment of children reported to youth protection services: A situation of grave concern. *Journal of Emotional Abuse*.
- 2 Trocmé, N., MacLaurin, B., Fallon, B., Daciuk, J., Billingsley, D., Tourigny, M., et al. (2001). *Canadian incidence study of reported child abuse and neglect: Final report*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada.
- 3 Lavergne, C., Chamberland, C., & Laporte, L. (2001, July). Importance and characteristics of child maltreatment reports assessed by child protection services in Quebec (Canada) where domestic violence has been identified. Paper presented at the 7th International Family Violence Research Conference, Portsmouth, NH.
- 4 Children's exposure to domestic violence is a complex issue, as children are often affected indirectly, while their mothers are usually the direct victims. Protection of the child is closely tied to the mother's situation.

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