

Editorial

Emotional Child Abuse Has to be Banned— The Science Backs Up Our Instincts

Oliver James

We cannot be blamed for feeling sceptical when this government talks of criminalising emotional abuse—parental harshness, hostility, and lack of love. These are the Uber-Thatcherites who talk up the “Big Society” but blame the individual. A wheeze for dumping their failure to support parents back on to them would be no surprise.

However, in proposing to make emotional abuse a crime, I am inclined to give them the benefit of the doubt. Many estimable campaigning groups, like Action for Children, have advocated such legislation.

The case for it comes from the nature as well as the nurture side of the debate. In a remarkably frank admission in a February edition of *The Guardian* newspaper this year, Robert Plomin, the country’s leading genetic psychologist, admitted of the Human Genome Project’s quest for genes for psychological traits of all kinds that “I’ve been looking for these genes for 15 years and I don’t have any” (Wilby, 2014). It is an accepted fact that the latest evidence shows that specific genes, or groups thereof, explain only tiny amounts of variance (1%) for any psychological traits (psychopathology, personality, cognition). The implication of this finding was summarised in the heading of an editorial in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*: “It’s the environment, stupid!” (Sonuga-Barke, 2010).

On the other side of the equation, the evidence for the role of maltreatment in causing emotional distress, in general (James, 2005), and emotional abuse in particular, has become overwhelming. Tellingly, this applies as much to the extreme of psychosis (Read & Dillon, 2013), as to the commoner problems, like depression and anxiety.

A definitive analysis of the forty-one best studies of the impact of childhood adversity on the risk of psychosis (mostly schizophrenia and bipolar disorder) was published in 2012 (Varese et al., 2012).

It broke down the different kinds of maltreatment, as follows.

- Childhood sexual abuse meant sexual acts toward a child, like intercourse and touching.
- Physical abuse was violent acts leading to injury or harm, such as harsh physical punishment.
- Emotional abuse was exposure to behaviour that might result in trauma, such as harshness and name-calling by parents.
- Physical neglect meant failure to provide adequate material care by those responsible, such as food or clothes.
- Emotional neglect meant things like being unresponsive to a child's emotional needs for love and security.
- Bullying was acts of repetitively aggressive behaviour by a peer, such as physical assault, intimidation, or repeated name-calling.
- Parental death referred to before the child reached the age of eighteen.

Regardless of the methods of study used (such as prospective *vs.* retrospective), the analysis showed that combined childhood adversity increased the risk of psychosis threefold. In order of the impact of different kinds of adversity, emotional abuse increased the risk by 3.4 times, physical abuse and emotional neglect did so by 2.9, sexual abuse and bullying by 2.4, and parental death by 1.7. The authors concluded that if all these forms of adversity were magically removed from the world, there would be one third less people with psychosis.

That emotional abuse is more damaging than sexual and physical abuse may seem surprising. One study found that the emotionally abused were twelve times more likely to be schizophrenic than the general population compared with six times for the physically abused, and twice as likely for the sexually abused (Rubino et al., 2009). Another study followed adolescents for fifteen years and found that over one third became schizophrenic if both parents were hostile, critical, and intrusive (high on measures of emotional expression), compared with none where one or neither parent were like that (Goldstein, 1987).

Similar findings for the impact of emotional abuse come from studies of less extreme emotional distress. In the definitive Minnesota study, which followed 180 high-risk children from infancy to age eighteen, 90% of those who suffered early maltreatment met the criteria for a diagnosis of mental illness (Sroufe et al., 2005). Maternal unresponsiveness before the age of two was a critical predictor of dissociation and later distress. Recent reconceptualisation of early emotional deprivation as trauma reinforce the importance of emotional abuse (Lanius, Vermetten, & Pain, 2010). Its impact on adult attachment patterns is sharply highlighted by a study that measured the degree of negativity mothers felt towards

their babies during the first month (Broussard & Cassidy, 2010). Followed up forty years later, the babies whose mothers had felt negative were fully eighteen times more likely to be insecurely attached adults.

It is in the light of this evidence that the government's plans must be understood. Whereas there seems to be an almost endless capacity for all governments to ignore the facts about climate change, the reality of the role of early nurture seems to be accepted in a cross-party consensus. While that has resulted in deplorably little legislation truly helping parents to meet the needs of their small children, at least the issue of its importance is uncontested.

The null hypothesis of the Human Genome Project will almost certainly have to be accepted: that genes play little or no role in explaining why one sibling is different from another. That should eventually result in a change in the use of resources: better preparation for parenthood and support for parents (by which I do not mean more group day-care); psychodynamically-based therapies that focus on childhood maltreatment in distressed adults, replacing the national cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) programme—the meta-analytic evidence is there for long-term effectiveness of dynamic therapy (Leichsenring & Rabung, 2008) whereas that is not the case for CBT (Westen, Novotny, & Thompson-Brenner, 2004).

In the meantime, we need not fear Orwellian intrusion on parents by social workers measuring how much we love our children. If there were laws against hitting children, as there should be, it would not result in many or even any convictions. It will be the same with this law.

What is important is for the authorities to signal clearly that nurture, in these early years, needs to be consistent from a few, emotionally available, primary caregivers. As John Bowlby pointed out sixty years ago, love is as vital as vitamins to a child's flourishing.

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