

Emotional Abuse

(Information taken from NSPCC - <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-is-child-abuse/types-of-abuse/emotional-abuse/>)

It can sometimes be hard to know what emotional abuse is, especially when it happens as part of other kinds of abuse. That's why we've got advice on the signs, effects and how to report it.

What is emotional abuse?

Emotional abuse is any type of abuse that involves the continual emotional mistreatment of a child. It's sometimes called psychological abuse. Emotional abuse can involve deliberately trying to scare, humiliate, isolate or ignore a child.

Emotional abuse is often a part of other kinds of [abuse](#), which means it can be difficult to [spot the signs](#) or tell the difference, though it can also happen on its own.

Types of emotional abuse

Emotional abuse includes:

- humiliating or constantly criticising a child
- threatening, shouting at a child or calling them names
- making the child the subject of jokes, or using sarcasm to hurt a child
- blaming and scapegoating
- making a child perform degrading acts
- not recognising a child's own individuality or trying to control their lives
- pushing a child too hard or not recognising their limitations
- exposing a child to upsetting events or situations, like [domestic abuse](#) or drug taking
- failing to promote a child's social development
- not allowing them to have friends
- persistently ignoring them
- being absent
- manipulating a child
- never saying anything kind, expressing positive feelings or congratulating a child on successes
- never showing any emotions in interactions with a child, also known as emotional neglect.

Signs of emotional abuse

There might not be any obvious physical signs of emotional abuse or neglect. And a child might not tell anyone what's happening until they reach a 'crisis point'. That's why it's important to look out for signs in how a child is acting.

As children grow up, their emotions change. This means it can be difficult to tell if they're being emotionally abused. But children who are being emotionally abused might:

- seem unconfident or lack self-assurance
- struggle to control their emotions
- have difficulty making or maintaining relationships
- act in a way that's inappropriate for their age.

The signs of emotional abuse can also be different for children at different ages.

Signs in babies and toddlers

Babies and pre-school children who are being emotionally abused or neglected might:

- be overly-affectionate to strangers or people they don't know well
- seem unconfident, wary or anxious
- not have a close relationship or bond with their parent
- be aggressive or cruel towards other children or animals.

Signs in older children

Older children might:

- use language you wouldn't expect them to know for their age
- act in a way or know about things you wouldn't expect them to know for their age
- struggle to control their emotions
- have extreme outbursts
- seem isolated from their parents
- lack social skills
- have few or no friends.

If a child reveals abuse

A child who is being emotionally abused might not realise what's happening is wrong. And they might even blame themselves. If a child talks to you about emotional abuse it's important to:

- listen carefully to what they're saying
- let them know they've done the right thing by telling you
- tell them it's not their fault
- say you'll take them seriously
- don't confront the alleged abuser
- explain what you'll do next
- report what the child has told you as soon as possible.

Effects of emotional abuse

Over time, emotional abuse and neglect can have serious long term effects on a child's social, emotional and physical health and development. This includes:

behaviour problems

Emotional abuse can change how a child behaves, such as:

- wanting attention or becoming clingy
- not caring how they act or what happens to them
- trying to make people dislike them
- developing risky behaviour, like stealing, [bullying](#) or running away.

emotional development

Emotional abuse can affect a child's emotional development, including:

- feeling, expressing and controlling emotions
- lacking confidence or causing anger problems
- finding it difficult to make and maintain healthy relationships later in life
- higher levels of [depression](#) and health problems as adults compared to those who experienced other [types of child abuse](#).

mental health problems

Emotional abuse of child or young person can increase the risk of:

- [mental health problems](#), including depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts
- eating disorders
- [self-harm](#)
- language development
- problems forming healthy relationships.

Who's at risk

Any child, from any background, can be at risk of emotional abuse. But some are more vulnerable than others.

Children who are emotionally abused are often suffering another [type of abuse or neglect](#) at the same time – but this isn't always the case.

When a family is going through a tough time, parents and carers might find it difficult to provide a safe and loving home for their children. This can happen when families are experiencing:

- relationship problems
- family arguments
- money problems or unemployment
- [mental health issues](#)
- poverty
- [addiction to drugs or alcohol](#)
- [domestic abuse](#).

Support

For parents

It's important to keep children safe from emotional abuse. But you also might be facing the same issues, perhaps from a partner or family member. The organisations below can offer you support and advice.

- [Relate](#)
[0300 003 0396](tel:03000030396)
You can talk to Relate about your relationship, including issues around emotional abuse.
- [National Domestic Violence Helpline](#)
[0808 2000 247](tel:08082000247)
A 24 hour free helpline run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge.
- [Men's Advice Line](#)
[0808 801 0327](tel:08088010327)
Advice and support for men experiencing domestic violence and abuse.
- [National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline](#)
[0800 999 5428](tel:08009995428)
Emotional and practical support for LGBT+ people experiencing domestic abuse.

For children and young people

It's important to remember that emotional abuse is often a big part of [domestic abuse](#). Our Domestic Abuse, Revolving Together (DART™) is a therapeutic service for mothers and children who have experienced domestic abuse.

Find out more about all [our services for children](#), including how to get in touch with ones in your area.

[The Hide Out](#), created by Women's Aid, is a space to help children and young people understand abuse. It also helps them learn how to take positive action.

How Childline can help

Children and young people can get support from Childline if they're facing emotional abuse or if they're worried about a friend or family member. Childline also has lots of helpful [advice about emotional abuse](#) on their website, including why it happens and what they can do. Calls to [0800 1111](#) are free and confidential. Children can also contact [Childline online](#).