



# The Wound Unseen

Child Psychological Maltreatment

## Definition

Child psychological maltreatment is defined as a repeated pattern or an extreme incident of caretaker behaviors that thwart the child's basic psychological development (e.g., sense of safety, mood stability, social competency, cognitive stimulation). It consists of acts of omission (like ignoring) and/or commission (like terrorizing) that convey a message to the child as worthless, defective, damaged, unloved, unwanted, expendable and/or existing in a sense of serving other's needs. Since a child being psychologically maltreated may not manifest emotional disturbance or disruptive behavior, we shall primarily consider caregivers' behaviors in substantiating psychological maltreatment.



## Spurning

verbal and nonverbal acts that reject and degrade a child.

## Exploiting/Corrupting

acts that encourage the child to develop inappropriate or immoral behaviors and attitudes.

## Emotional Unresponsiveness

acts that ignore the child's attempts and needs to interact, failing to express affection and love for the child and showing little or no emotion in interactions with the child.



## Terrorizing

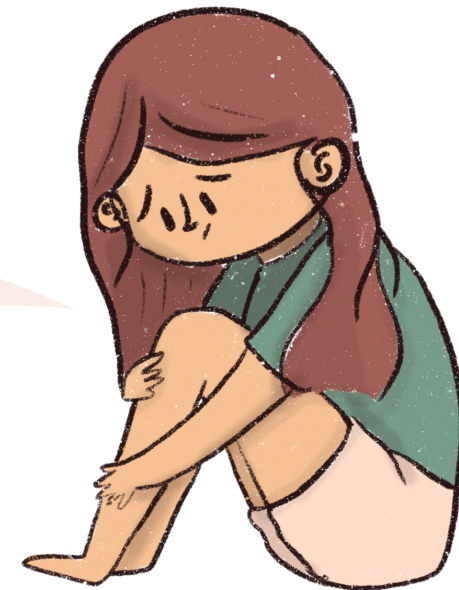
behavior that threatens or is likely to physically hurt, kill, abandon, or place the child or child's loved ones or objects in dangerous or frightening situations.

## Isolating

acts that consistently and unreasonably deny the child's needs to interact with peers or adults inside or outside the home, preventing the child from attending activities that can promote their development.

## Why child psychological maltreatment is often underreported?

1. Does not result in physical wound.
2. Hard to be identified within a short period of time.
3. Frequently co-occurs with other types of maltreatment.

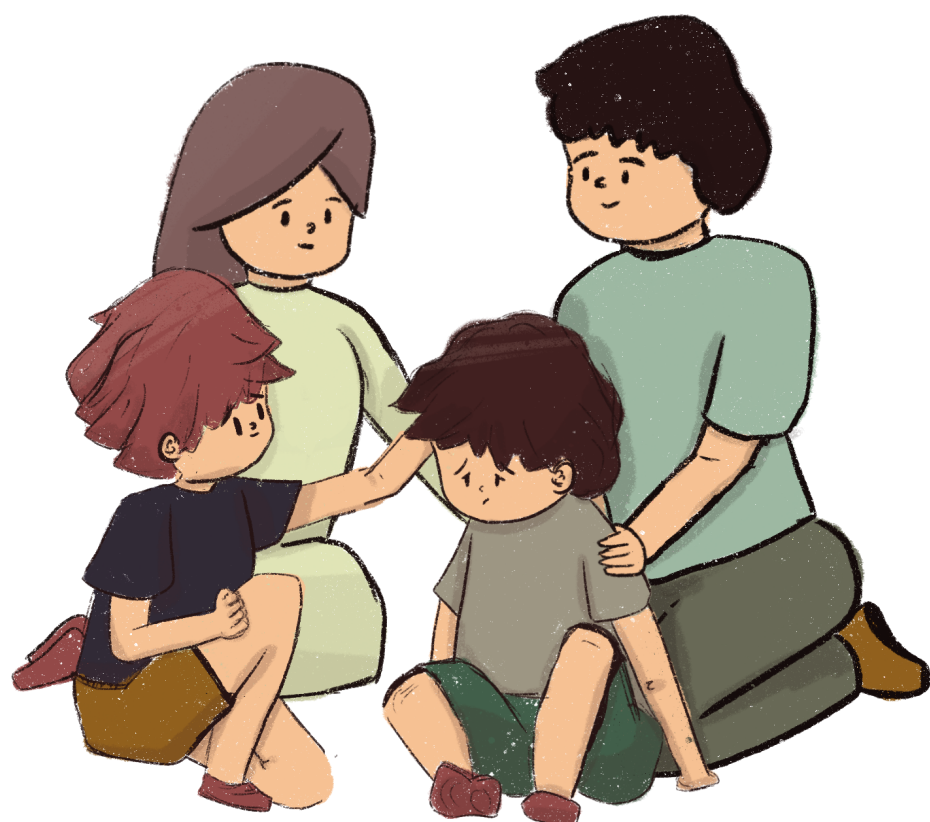


## Impacts of child psychological maltreatment

Children who are being psychologically maltreated are likely to develop an internal negative attribution about themselves. They may mistakenly believe that they are unworthy or unlovable, or adopt the corrupted moral values of adults.

Meta-analyses of over 120 studies found that individuals with psychological maltreatment history have 3-fold increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviors than non-abused individuals. Also, they were 2.5 times more likely to develop eating disorders. (Norman et al., 2012)

Neuroimaging study found increased amygdala activation in response to emotional facial expressions in adults reporting child psychological maltreatment history. Over time, persistent vigilance for facial expression may lead to misinterpretation of all emotional faces as threatening and result in interpersonal difficulties. (van Harmelen et al., 2013)



## Summary

Although psychological maltreatment does not inflict any visible wounds, it inevitably leads to a broad array of long-term adverse outcomes. Let's join hands to recognize and report psychological maltreatment, so that family at risk can receive the needed assistance and children can grow in a supportive living environment.

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