

Emotional Disturbances: The Effects of Parental Neglect Types on Children

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Abstract

The aim of this current study will be to focus on a silent epidemic, that because of its often subtle nature goes unnoticed and untreated, yet creates life-changing problems for the children who experience parental emotional neglect. This study will attempt to narrow down which types of neglect are most harmful or most predictive of emotional disturbances. Neglect types that will be looked at are psychological/emotional, physical, and cognitive. Some neglectful behavior may fall into two or three of these categories, and each will be rated in this manner. Participants will be taken from several juvenile centers across the nation with an equal amount of males and females who have previously been diagnosed with emotional disturbances. They will each be interviewed by a highly trained and experienced juvenile psychologist and monitored by a lie-detector during the interview. This study will advance the knowledge of parental neglect on emotional disturbances in children. However, it would be beneficial for further studies to determine the effects of both neglect and abuse as separate and combined factors in emotional disturbances.

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In working with children with emotional disturbances, it is important to understand possible causes of this disorder. Although, there is a vast amount of research on various aspects of emotional disturbances, most of these studies deal with social support systems, while fewer studies investigate the actual causes. There may be some evidence toward biological determinants, as with children with developmental disorders; however, there is more evidence showing an effect between emotional disturbances, and parental neglect, most specifically within dysfunctional family systems. The premise behind the current study is consistent with other studies in showing that parental neglect, a form of child abuse, is a significant contributor to emotional disturbances. More specifically, it is important to determine which types of emotional neglect are most harmful in order to understand the problem better. Gender will also be studied to determine whether there is an effect.

The types of emotional neglect that will be looked at are emotional/psychological, cognitive, and physical. Emotional/psychological deals with depriving a child of his or her basic needs that provide support for healthy emotional and psychological growth such as leaving a child feeling anxious, stressed or fearful after experiencing a parental quarrel or fight. Cognitive neglect would be a form of neglect affecting the normal, healthy cognitive growth such as encouraging racism. Physical neglect would be considered as neglectful behaviors that put the child at an increased risk of harm such as ignoring a child's illness, not taking him or her to the doctor or giving medication to relieve pain.

It is also important to understand the difference between emotional neglect, emotional abuse, and emotional maltreatment. Emotional neglect is considered to be acts of omission

concerning the care of a child. It is more narrowly defined as a pervasive problem within the interactions of the relationship. It is distinguished from emotional abuse, which would be acts of commission - deliberate acts. Emotional maltreatment is an inclusive term which includes neglect, and abuse (Iwaniec, Larkin, & McSherry, 2007). This term will be used throughout the literature review since that is how it is referred. However, the current study will attempt to single out emotional neglect as an indicator of emotional disturbances.

Iwaniec et al. (2007) also found that the effects of emotional maltreatment are detrimental to the child's development. These acts of maltreatment convey to the child that he or she is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, or endangered. It includes emotional unavailability, unresponsiveness, and withdrawal of attention. An emotional disturbance can be characterized by poor self image, cognitive delays and difficulties, problems with coping, and difficulty forming meaningful relationships, or connecting with others.

Changes in effects can be seen at different stages of development. Children who have been emotionally maltreated have higher aggression, anger, and frustration. Older children and adolescence experience social rejection, dependency and school difficulties. College students have difficulties with clinical distress, and psychological disturbances such as obsessive compulsiveness, depression and anxiety. Symptoms in adults include depression, eating disorders suicidal ideation, anxiety, low self-esteem, interpersonal and sexual problems. They are also more likely than others to have substance abuse problems (Iwaniec, et al. 2007).

Although all forms of maltreatment have an element of emotional harm, (Hart, Binggeli, & Brassard (1998), as seen in Iwaniec et al. 2007), psychological unavailability from parents was seen as the most harmful type of neglect (Egeland & Erickson 1987, as seen in Iwaniec et al. 2007). This type of neglect is defined as punishing positive normal behaviors such as smiling,

exploration, discouraging early attachment, damaging self-esteem, and inhibiting the development of interpersonal skills. Consequences linked to psychological maltreatment are problems with verbal and non-verbal communication skills, patience, goal setting, and ego development in regard to confidence and security (Garbarino, 1997, as seen in Iwaniec et al., 2007).

Research also indicates that perceived low parental care and overprotection in childhood are associated with depression and anxiety disorders later in life (Gerlsma et al. 1990 as seen in Newcomb, Mineka, Zinbarg, & Griffith, 2007). Further research concluded that child maltreatment presents alarming challenges which interfere with a healthy development of self esteem and depressive symptoms. Physical neglect was positively associated with depressive symptoms, suggesting that children who had experienced physical neglect were at higher risk for depression, compared to those without such experiences (Kim & Cicchetti, 2006).

Another study (Herring, Gray, Taffe, Tonge, Sweeney, & Einfeld, 2006) looked beyond blaming the parents, and concluded that child behavior and emotional problems were significantly positively correlated with parent and family distress. While this study was in reference to children with Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD), the link between familial stress and the child's emotional problems were significant. Results showed the mothers' stress thermometer at 0.41, and the fathers' stress thermometer at 0.52. These results show significant effects of child behavior and emotional problems on parent outcome. This study did not suggest any evidence that these children were born with an emotional disturbance; instead, it discussed the observable link between parental stress and emotional problems in toddlers. This research suggested that parents of toddlers with PDD had an increased stress level compared to the parents with typical children. It also showed that parental stress and problem behavior are

mutually escalating, and that stress contributed to the behavior and not the diagnosis itself, nor was it linked to the severity of the diagnosis (Herring, et al. 2006).

This study showed a link between parental stress and family dysfunction. It suggested that the reduction of the child's behavioral problems has the capability of reducing parental stress, mental health problems and family dysfunctions. The impact of a child's behavior may in fact determine the stress level, as well as the parent's behavior toward that child. However, it could also be speculated that the stress on the parent due to the child's behavior would only uncover dysfunctions already present within the parent, and not cause them. If this idea is correct, then it would also be true that a parent's effect on their child, could also uncover dysfunctions already present in the child.

Taken into consideration the difficulties experienced by children due to neglectful parenting, it is imperative to uncover the aspects of this problematic family function. These are not moments found throughout childhood that can be overlooked. They are systematic behaviors that can affect the lifespan of the individuals who experience these harmful behaviors. Therefore, further research is crucial. This study is intended to take that closer look into types of neglect and the impact they play on the lives of so many children.

Method

Participants

Participants would be 100 previously diagnosed emotionally disturbed juveniles (50 females and 50 males) between 14 and 17 years old. They will be taken from several juvenile detention centers across the United States. The juveniles will participate on a voluntary basis, and will be selected using a simple random design of computer selection. Juveniles will be

informed that there will be no early release in exchange for participating in the study, and will be given extra T.V. time for completion of the survey. The survey will be conducted by an interviewer who is a highly trained psychologist with background in emotionally disturbed juveniles, but will have no previous work experience with the juveniles in this study. A lie detector test will be administered during the interviews to give the study more credibility.

This study will take approximately one year to complete since time is needed to research and contact participants, set up, and conduct interviews, and gather and interpret data in a meaningful way.

Procedure

Participants will be interviewed at their respective juvenile centers in the interrogation room or another room allowing little or no disruptions. A modified version of the Carers' Emotionally Abusive Behavior Questionnaire (Iwaniec, et al. 2006), will be used to rate the effect of different types of neglect on emotional disturbances. The reason for the modification will be to single out emotional neglect from emotional abuse, which may be hard to separate, but necessary since acts of neglect, are the central focus of this study.

The questionnaire will be completed by the interviewer in response to the answers given by the juveniles during the interview. The questionnaire consists of 24 questions related to their childhood memories of being neglected by their parents. In response to each question, the nominal scale will include the following categories: often, seldom, almost never, and length of neglect, defined as occasional or frequent which will help give the background of neglect as well as separate neglect types into categories. If the length of neglect was less than a year, or occurred

almost never or seldom, it will not be considered as an effect on emotional disturbances. Some neglect types overlap, and will therefore be scored in more than one group. For example, parental self-harming behavior would be given a point for emotional neglect, as well as a point for cognitive neglect, as this act can affect the child's emotions and cognitive development. The scores will be added and categories will be compared to find an effect between types of neglect and emotional disturbances.

Implications and Limitations

Although this study will increase the understanding of parental neglect on emotional disturbances as it focuses on acts of omission and separates abuse types, there are some limitations which need to be addressed. First of all is that these juveniles may have no memory for some of the neglect which may have happened during their formative years. They may also have suffered memory blocks due to the neglect. There may also be a problem in not looking at the confounding variable of abuse (acts of commission) against the child, which may be the real indicator of, or just an added influence on emotional disturbances. Perception should also be considered as a factor in that these juveniles may perceive neglect to be more serious than it was, or they may have thought that their experiences were normal, especially at a young age when life at home is what they were most familiar with.

One final limitation would be that the juveniles in detention centers do not accurately represent the emotionally disturbed population in the United States, or cross culturally. Nevertheless, this study adds to the knowledge base of understanding of emotional disturbances, and may lead to better services to help the families in which these behaviors occur. It is,

however, necessary for further studies to look at the comparison of neglect and abuse and how they relate, and differentiate in their effect, both separate and combined, on emotional disturbances.

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