

**Psychological Maltreatment:  
An Overview and Discussion of Gaps  
in Assessment and Treatment**

**Amy J. L. Baker, Ph.D.**  
Director of Research  
The New York Foundling  
Vincent J. Fontana Center  
For Child Protection

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Psychological Maltreatment  
is Widespread**

- 90% of parents in a national phone survey reported using psychological aggression with their children (Straus & Field, 2003).
- 15% of adults (across 69 studies) in community samples and 32% of adults in clinical samples reported severe to extreme emotional abuse in their childhood (Baker & Maiorino, 2010) .

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Evidence of Damage Cuts Across  
Behavioral and Emotional Domains**

- Problems of intrapersonal thoughts, feelings & behaviors
- Emotional problems
- Social Competency problems & anti-social functioning
- Learning problems
- Physical Health problems

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Assessment Issues**

1. PM is not typically exhibited as a single isolated incident. A pattern of behavior must be observed.
2. PM must be understood in the context of the child's development. What is terrorizing for an infant is different than for an adolescent.
3. PM must be understood in context of family's culture.

4

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Definitional Issues**

1. No bright line between poor parenting and psychological maltreatment.
2. Researchers and clinicians and policy makers use different measures.
3. Lack of consensus in research measures.
4. APSAC definition consensus definition at this point.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**APSAC Definition**

- Caregiver behavior that results in the child feeling unloved, unworthy, or only of value in meeting another's needs.
  
- Six categories of psychological maltreatment.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Five Types of PM**

1. Spurning
2. Terrorizing
3. Isolating
4. Exploiting/corrupting
5. Denying emotional responsiveness

7

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Spurning**

Hostile, rejecting/degrading, verbal and nonverbal caregiver acts that reject and degrade a child.

8

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Four Types of Spurning**

1. Belittling, degrading and other non physical forms of overtly hostile or rejecting treatment
2. Shaming child for showing normal emotions
3. Singling out child for unfair treatment
4. Public humiliation

9

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### **Terrorizing**

Behaviors that threaten or are likely to physically hurt, kill, abandon or place the child or child's loved ones or objects in recognizably dangerous situations.

10

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### **Five Types of Terrorizing**

1. Placing a child in an unpredictable , chaotic or frightening circumstances
2. Placing a child in recognizably dangerous situations
3. Setting a rigid or unrealistic expectations with the threat of loss, harm, or danger if they are not met
4. Threatening to perpetrate violence against child
5. Threatening or perpetrating violence against child's loved ones or objects

11

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### **Isolating**

Consistently denying the child opportunities to meet his/her needs for interacting and communicating with peers or adults inside or outside the home.

12

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Two Types of Isolating

1. Confining the child or placing unreasonable limitations on the child's freedom of movement within his or her environment
2. Placing unreasonable limitations or restrictions on social interactions with peers or adults in the community

13

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Exploiting/Corrupting

Encouraging the child to develop inappropriate, maladaptive, self destructive, anti-social, or criminal behaviors.

14

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Four Types of Exploiting/Corrupting

1. Modeling, permitting, or encouraging antisocial behavior
2. Modeling, permitting, or encouraging developmentally inappropriate behavior
3. Encouraging or coercing the abandonment of developmentally appropriate autonomy through extreme over-involvement, intrusiveness, and/or dominance
4. Restricting or interfering with cognitive development

15

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Denying Emotional Responsiveness

Acts that ignore the child's attempts and needs to interact and needs for affection.

16

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Three Types of Denying Emotional Responsiveness

1. Being detached and uninvolved through incapacity or lack of motivation
2. Failing to show warmth or affection
3. Only interacting when necessary

17

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Types of Psychological Maltreatment by Developmental Stage

- Infancy
- Toddlerhood
- School-Age
- Adolescence

18

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Psychological Maltreatment of Children in Foster Care**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Why Is It Important To Assess**

1. Children who have been abused or neglected are very likely to have experienced PM as well.
2. Probably 90% of children in out of home care have experienced PM.
3. We don't necessarily know which type, how frequent, or how it affects child.
4. We don't know which adults might be engaging in these behaviors towards the child.
5. We believe that information about PM will not be spontaneously raised by children or asked about by mental health professionals.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Purpose Of Our Study**

To include in the routine mental health screenings of children in out of home care an assessment of:

1. their experience of each type of psychological maltreatment
2. PM by several different potential important adults in their lives
3. and the extent to which these experiences bothered them

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Procedures**

- Measure: 19 items based on APSAC definition
- Sample : 84 foster care youth
- Methods : Measure was administered as part of routine mental health screenings

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Findings**

1. 70 of 84 (83.3%) of youth reported exposure to some PM behaviors.
2. 20% reported all five types.
3. 62% said birth parent and 29% said foster parent engaged in PM behaviors.
4. 32% to 56% said it bothered them "very much."

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Do Evidence-Based Parenting Programs Teach Parents about Psychological Maltreatment?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### Methods

- Teams of two researchers/experts in PM independently coded the curricula of 10 universal parenting programs and nine programs for high risk families.
- 18 types of PM were coded as taught or not taught in the curriculum based on whether the concept was mentioned, examples were provided and the parents were taught both what not to do and what to do.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Findings: Universal Parenting Programs

- Few programs provided parents with information about “what not to do.”
- Not one program included information about what to do and what not to do for all 18 types.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Findings: Parenting Programs for High-Risk Parents

Not one program designed and/or tested with high-risk and maltreating parents included information about “what not to do” and “what to do” for all 18 types of psychological maltreatment.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**“Do Abuse and Trauma Specific Treatments for Children Address Issue of Psychological Maltreatment?”**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Our Study**

- **Methods:** Interviewed the developer of 11 manualized evidence based mental health treatments for abused/neglected children.
- **Findings:** Only half of the developers reported that the training materials for their programs covered the topic of psychological maltreatment.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Next Steps for the Field**

1. Determine extent to which effects of psychological maltreatment are addressed in evidence-based treatments for abused and traumatized children.
2. Develop training materials for foster parents and test their effectiveness.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---