

Assuring Emotional Security for Children

By John C. Patterson

To help, adults must first understand emotional maltreatment.

Every day most of us have untold interactions with children—our own, members of our Scouting unit, and others with whom we come in contact.

We complete many of these contacts almost subconsciously without a second's thought; in fact, most of the routine adult-child transactions do not require a substantial amount of our attention. At times, however, it may be helpful to be a bit more analytical of the ways we interact with children and how such interactions affect the child.

Has something like this ever happened to you? You're at summer camp when one of the Scouts proudly approaches you with a piece of pottery he just baked in the craft shop. Instead of complimenting his workmanship, you say, "That's good, now go and put it away. We've got to go to the dining hall."

You could tell by his expression that your reaction was less than he expected. It would have taken only a few seconds longer to recognize something special about his project that would communicate real appreciation for his accomplishment. His face carried a clear meaning: rejection.

The purpose of this article is to increase adults' understanding of how they can provide an emotionally-secure environment for children. In addition, the article will show the potential harm to children that is possible, even from unintentional emotional maltreatment.

Dr. James Garbarino, president of the Erickson Institute for Advanced Studies in Human Development, has categorized the five most common forms of emotional maltreatment of children:

- **Rejecting**—An explicit refusal to accept the child. Children thrive on acceptance and are devastated by rejection.
A common example of this type of emotional maltreatment by parents is negative comparison to another child: "Why can't you be more like your brother?" "You're always messing up." Or it could be total rejection: "You can never do anything right!" Another example of this is based on the sex of the child: "Why couldn't you have been a girl [or a boy]? It would have been so much better."
- **Ignoring**—Being psychologically unavailable, depriving the child of essential stimulation and responsiveness. Children need a partner to develop normally.
One example of this may be the parent who works long hours, due to economic needs or the demands of the job. Usually she or he does not take time to talk to or otherwise interact with the child, nor to express affection.
An extreme case of ignoring is a recent situation in which a drug-addicted mother left her children locked in a mobile home while she and her boy friend were away for the weekend.
- **Terrorizing**—Verbally assaulting or bullying the child, creating a climate of fear. When the parent destroys the child's possessions or attacks his beloved friends or pets, that parent also terrorizes the child. Such actions teach the lesson that the world is unstable.
Examples of terrorizing include spouse abuse in the presence of the child. Threatening dire punishments for minor rule infractions is also included. Additionally, the rules themselves may be unreasonable.
- **Isolating**—Cutting the child off from normal social experiences. This prevents the child from forming friendships and deprives him of contact with social networks and relationships that would be supportive.
An example is the parent who refuses to allow the child to bring friends home or to go to friends' houses to play. Isolating also could include forbidding the child to join Scouting or other groups or to participate in school extracurricular activities.
- **Corrupting**—Teaching the child socially deviant patterns of behavior and thus mis-socializing the child.
Common examples of corrupting behavior on the part of the care-givers include permitting, or sometimes encouraging, the use of drugs or alcohol. Another example is the use of a child in the commission of a crime.

Common to all five forms of emotional maltreatment is the impact on children's development of negative feelings about themselves, society, and their inability to develop trusting relationships with others.

Isolated instances of any of these would probably not constitute emotional abuse or neglect. However, if any become part of a behavior pattern, then intervention is warranted.

Scout leaders should be aware that children use these same kinds of emotional maltreatment on other children. Hazings and initiations, for example, use terrorizing, isolating, and rejecting.

Hazings and initiations are prohibited as part of the Scouting program, however. And leaders should encourage their members to find more positive methods of inducting newcomers and building cohesive units.

Ten Strategies to Build Emotional Security in Scouting

1. **Set the example.** Be aware of how you interact with children. Listen to yourself. Do you use inappropriate language? Are your interactions in keeping with the purpose of the program and the spirit of the Scout Law?
2. **Ensure that the unit has trained leaders.** A well-trained leader is more likely to produce positive experiences for youth, the effects of which may last a lifetime. Through training, leaders learn about the Scouting program and the developmental needs of the members of their units.
3. **Use Scouting's support personnel.** Commissioner staffers, chartered organization representatives, and professional staff should be asked for assistance when leaders encounter problems that they feel are beyond their capacity to resolve. Knowing you are not alone can reduce the stress that you might otherwise unintentionally direct toward the members of your unit.
4. **Do not use or tolerate others' use of derogatory nicknames.** Terms like "Four Eyes," "Chubby," "Retard," "Gimp," and others exploit the sensitivities of the child and can interfere with self-confidence. Discourage the use of this kind of nickname by unit members. Children with disabilities are especially susceptible to this emotional maltreatment.
5. **When correcting a child, deal only with the specific behavior that you want to change.** Statements such as, "You always mess up. Why can't you do anything right?" are counter productive and reinforce negative self-concepts. A better approach is to focus on the problem. For example, "I get very worried when you've promised to be home by nine o'clock and you're not here until after midnight."

6. **Look for opportunities to recognize accomplishments in positive ways.** Success breeds success. Children need to have successful experiences and have their achievements recognized to develop self-esteem. Scouting provides excellent opportunities for meaningful recognition through its advancement and leadership development programs.
7. **Keep your level of expectation within the realms of the child's ability.** Children may be challenged to, as the U.S. Army says, "Be all that you can be." But we should not expect kids to do more than they are capable of achieving. Success is a progression of small steps, not one giant leap.
8. **If you suspect that a child is being emotionally maltreated, try to help.** You may help ease the pressure by recognizing that a parent or leader is experiencing stress, and offering aid. A comment like, "It looks like you're having a rough time today; can I help?" may be like throwing a life-preserver to a drowning person. You can also help a child cope with an abusive situation. Children being abused at home need reassurance that their parents do love them but may not know how to express that love. They also need to know there are things they can do if they are being emotionally abused: talking to a person they can trust (this may be you); or, if the abuse is from another adult, talking with their parents about it.
9. **Work with the other families** with children in your child's pack, troop, Varsity Scout team, or Explorer post. By doing so you help ensure that all children are treated with respect and in ways that foster self-confidence and emotional competence. Raising children is a community responsibility. By working with other parents in your church, school, or neighborhood you will help to focus attention on positive ways to nurture the children with whom your child plays.
10. **Use the Scout Oath and Law to guide your interactions with children.** Adherence to the basic principles of Scouting can help insure that emotional maltreatment won't occur. Stress these principles with youth members as guides for their relations with their peers.

Junior leaders need to know that they are responsible for demonstrating positive leadership skills and to seek guidance when confronted with situations beyond their capability.

These 10 strategies can help develop an emotionally-nurturing environment for children in Scouting and in families. These techniques can also be applied to emotional abuse inside and outside of the program.

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