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Assessment of Emotional Abuse

0070-534.10 | Revision Date: 07/01/14

Overview

This policy guide provides information on assessing and investigating allegations of emotional abuse.

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Version Summary

This policy guide was updated from the 12/19/11 version, as part of the Policy Redesign, in accordance with the DCFS Strategic Plan.

POLICY

Assessment of Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse refers to a situation when a person willfully causes or permits a child to suffer, inflicts unjustifiable physical pain or mental suffering on a child, or willfully

causes or permits the child to be placed in a situation in which their health is endangered while under their custody.

To determine if emotional abuse has occurred, there must be information on the caregiver's behavior and the child's behavior and condition over a period of time. CSW's determine whether there is a chronic behavioral pattern of emotional abuse. Behavior alone is not deemed, in and of itself, to be evidence of emotional abuse.

Examples of caregiver's behavior associated with emotional abuse can include but are not limited to:

- Belittling (e.g. reducing, dismissing, or causing a child to feel less significant to the point where the child views him/herself in the way consistent with the speaker's words)
- Coldness (e.g. showing little or no warmth, interest, or affection towards a child)
- Willful Cruelty
- Exploitation
- Harassment
- Ignoring
- Inappropriate Control, including lack of control, over-control, or inconsistent control
- Isolating, particularly emotionally and/or distancing a child from situations
- Neglect
- Rejecting
- Sexualized insults, including making sexualized comments, denying the child's privacy, belittling the child with sexualized name, and blaming the child for being the victim of sexual abuse
- Terrorizing, including intimidating or coercing a child with violence or the threat of violence
- Verbal assaults
- Using a child in marital conflict, saying negative things about the other parent in front of the child, coaching the child to make false allegations about the other parent, rejecting the child for expressing love for the other parent, forcing the child to choose sides.

Emotional abuse is typically not an isolated incident. Occasional negative attitudes or actions are not considered emotional abuse. Indicators of suspected emotional abuse may include, but are not limited to the following. The child:

- Is withdrawn, depressed, apathetic, extensively fearful or confused
- Is overly rigid in conforming to instructions and seeks approval to the extreme

- Is verbally abusive, hostile, or provocative
- Shows extremes in behavior, (e.g. extreme passivity or aggression towards self or others)
- Does not communicate verbally or physically with others
- Acts either in an inappropriately adult or in an inappropriately infantile manner
- Is clingy and forms indiscriminate attachments
- Reports a lack of attachment to the parent
- Strongly lacks self-esteem
- Has made a suicide attempt
- Exhibits poor school performance, substance abuse, or ongoing lack of sleep
- Runs away or hides from home
- Has severe anxiety

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PROCEDURE

Investigating Allegations of Emotional Abuse

CSW Responsibilities

1. **Investigate** the allegation of emotional abuse. Use the child's own words and terminology. Give accurate quotes of both questions and answers as much as possible. Do not interpret.
 - **In cases of marital conflict, carefully distinguish these situations from those where a parent is genuinely trying to protect a child from unsafe contact with an abusive parent.**

2. **The following should be considered when interviewing the child:**
 - **The child's perception of his/her parent(s)/caregiver(s).**
 - **How the child feels that he/she is treated.**
 - **Whether the child feels he/she has someone to talk to, particularly when upset.**
 - **Whether the parent/caregiver makes the child do anything they do not wish to do.**
 - **Whether the child feels safe at home.**
 - **The amount of praise a child receives and the reason for praise.**
 - **What a child likes about his/her parent(s).**
 - **How the parents show affection to the child, particularly if there is physical contact, such as hugging and kissing.**
 - **Whether the child feels that they are treated the same as other kids in the family or differently.**

3. **Document** all observations and information gathered during the investigation from all sources/witnesses in the Contact Notebook and/or the Investigation Narrative.
- Include all indications that the child is suffering or at risk of suffering severe emotional damage.
 - Include any evaluation(s) made by a mental health professional and any statements from treating therapists

APPROVALS

None

HELPFUL LINKS

Referenced Policy Guides

[0070-548.10, Disposition of Allegations and Closure of Emergency Response Referrals](#)

[0070-548.24, Structural Decision Making \(SDM\)](#)

[0070-548.25, Completing the Structured Decision Making \(SDM\) Safety Plan](#)

[0400-503.10, Contact Requirement and Exceptions](#)

Statutes

[California Code of Civil Procedure Section 527.6 \(a\)\(3\)](#) – Defines harassment as “unlawful violence [or] a credible threat of violence ... that seriously alarms, annoys, or harasses the person, and that serves no legitimate purpose. The course of conduct must be such as would cause a reasonable person to suffer substantial emotional distress, and must actually cause substantial emotional distress to the petitioner.

[California Department of Social Services \(CDSS\) Manual of Policies and Procedures \(MPP\) Sections 31-002\(c\)\(9\)\(A\)](#) – Defines emotional abuse as referring to nonphysical mistreatment, resulting in disturbed behavior on the part of the child such as severe withdrawal, regression, bizarre behavior, hyperactivity, or dangerous acting-out behavior.

[CDSS MPP 31-002\(e\)\(13\)](#) – Defines “exploitation” as forcing or coercing a child into performing functions which are beyond his/her capabilities or capacities, or into illegal or degrading acts. The term also includes sexual exploitation as defined by Penal Code Section 11165.1(c).

Penal Code Section 11165.3, – Defines emotional abuse as “the willful harming or injuring of a child or the endangering of the person or health of a child” and as a situation in which any person willfully causes or permits any child to suffer, or inflicts thereon, unjustifiable mental suffering.

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