

**Helping Students With Emotional Abuse:  
A Critical Area of Competence for School Counselors**

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### **Abstract**

Many school counselors experience difficulties in identifying and reporting suspected cases of emotional abuse. These difficulties are concerning, given the relatively high prevalence rates of emotional abuse. In this article, we discuss the definition of emotional abuse, review research on its prevalence and psychological correlates, and provide recommendations for reporting suspected cases. Attention is also given to the school counselor's role in training teachers/staff on emotional abuse issues and intervening with students who experience emotional abuse.

*Keywords:* emotional abuse; school counseling; reporting

## **Helping Students With Emotional Abuse: A Critical Area of Competence for School Counselors**

In this article, we provide a primer on emotional abuse for school counselors. First, we articulate the need for this review by discussing difficulties that school counselors encounter in helping students with emotional abuse. Subsequently, we address definitional issues, current research in this area, and practical recommendations for reporting suspected cases of emotional abuse. Included in these recommendations is the presentation of a simple mnemonic device (LENS), which may assist school counselors in recalling key issues related to identification and reporting of emotional abuse. Finally, we provide strategies for teacher/staff training on the topic and examples of school counseling interventions for helping students with emotional abuse.

### **Challenges in Helping Students With Emotional Abuse**

Researchers found that school counselors often struggle in recognizing emotional abuse and reporting suspected cases to Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies (Bryant, 2009; Bryant & Millsom, 2005). Bryant (2009), for example, examined the child abuse reporting practices of 193 school counselors. The vast majority of participants in this study were master's-level school counselors with several years of professional experience (mean experience as a school counselor = 9.38 years). The results indicated that physical abuse was the form of abuse most often reported by participants. By contrast, emotional abuse was the form of abuse most frequently suspected, but not reported, by school counselors. Participants also noted feeling least certain about their ability to identify emotional abuse, compared to all other forms of childhood maltreatment.

Given the tendency of many school counselors to misunderstand and under-report suspected cases of emotional abuse (Bryant, 2009), a thorough, updated review on this topic is needed. Previous authors addressed the school counselor's response to child abuse, in general (Horton & Cruise, 2001; Lambie, 2005). Such reviews, are somewhat dated and, more importantly, provide only limited attention to complexities presented by cases of emotional abuse, in particular. In the few instances where researchers (McEachern, Aluede, & Kenny, 2008; Nesbit & Philpott, 2002) specifically considered cases of emotional abuse in the context of school counseling, they focused on emotional abuse as perpetuated by teachers, rather than by parents/guardians. Thus, a more comprehensive review is warranted, which incorporates recent theoretical developments on the definition and reporting of emotional abuse (e.g., Marshall, 2012; Slep, Heyman, & Snarr, 2011) and addresses the school counselor's response to emotional abuse as perpetrated by parents/guardians. In the following section, we begin this discussion with attention to the definition of emotional abuse.

### **Definition of Childhood Emotional Abuse**

Childhood maltreatment refers to acts of commission or omission by an adult, which endanger the physical or psychological well-being of a child and violate social sanctions regarding proper parenting (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Christoffel et al., 1992). Theorists and many state statutes categorized childhood maltreatment into four basic types: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; National Research Council [NRC], 1993; Trickett, Kim, & Prindle, 2011). The three types of abuse (i.e., physical, sexual, and emotional abuse) are generally understood to include acts of commission, or active

forms of maltreatment, which endanger the well-being of a child, while neglect includes acts of omission, or passive forms of maltreatment, which endanger the well-being of a child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Crosson-Tower, 1999; NRC, 1993). In this section, we address the distinguishing characteristics of emotional abuse as well as cultural considerations pertinent to its identification.

Childhood emotional abuse is arguably the most challenging form of abuse to classify and define (Wekerle, 2011; Wright, 2007). Unlike physical abuse and sexual abuse, which include various forms of physical contact between a child and older person, emotional abuse is essentially a non-contact form of maltreatment (Bernstein, Ahluvalia, Pogge, & Handelsman, 1997; Glaser, 2002; Keashly & Harvey, 2005; McGee & Wolfe, 1991). That is, emotional abuse does not involve physical contact between the abuser and child. Hence, markers of emotional abuse are less tangible, compared to other types of abuse (McKenzie, 2009; Romeo, 2000).

Moreover, researchers (Esteban, 2006; Garbarino, Guttman, & Seeley, 1986; Moore & Pepler, 2006; Trickett et al., 2011) grouped diverse behaviors under the construct of childhood emotional abuse—a practice which presents additional challenges in defining and differentiating emotional abuse. For example, Garbarino et al. (1986) defined childhood emotional abuse as a child's experience of being rejected (i.e., denied a sense of positive self-regard and worth), isolated (i.e., removed from relationships with others), terrorized (i.e., intimidated or frightened with threats of harm), ignored (i.e., denied responsiveness from others), or corrupted (i.e., encouraged to engage in deviant behavior) by an older person.

More recently, definitions of childhood emotional abuse emphasized hostile verbal communications, which attack a child's sense of psychological or physical well-being (Bernstein et al., 1997; Esteban, 2006; McEachern et al., 2008). Examples of hostile verbal communications include an adult's behavior of ridiculing a child's physical appearance or threatening the safety of a child (Esteban, 2006). Emotional abuse may also include nonverbal, non-contact behaviors (Keashly & Harvey, 2005; Sansone, Jackson, & Wiederman, 2007; Wolfe & Mclsaac, 2011). Examples of nonverbal forms of childhood emotional abuse include isolating a child from relationships and solitary confinement of a child for extended periods of time (Crosson-Tower, 1999; Moore & Pepler, 2006; Sansone et al., 2007).

### **Emotional Abuse as a Pattern of Behavior**

There is consensus that childhood emotional abuse refers to a pattern of behaviors over time, rather than a single, isolated incident (Glaser & Prior, 1997; Horton & Cruise, 2001; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). As argued by various authors (Horton & Cruise, 2001; Wright, 2007), many parents make the mistake of verbally demeaning or attacking their children at one time or another. In general, then, childhood emotional abuse pertains to parent-child relationships where non-contact forms of aggression (e.g., verbal assaults) become repetitive (Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). As Romeo (2000) stated, "emotional abuse is not just a single event, but a systematic diminishment of the victim. It is the continuous behavior by the abuser that reduces a child's self-concept to the point where the child feels unworthy" (p. 184). Thus, school counselors are generally recommended to consider patterns of interaction over time when conceptualizing a case of suspected childhood emotional abuse. It should be

noted, however, that emotional abuse may be understood as a single event in extreme situations (McEachern et al., 2008; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). An example of extreme emotional abuse is the solitary confinement of a child in a closet for days. In such cases, the school counselor may not need to await the repetition of behaviors before reporting to a CPS agency (Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004).

### **Cultural Considerations in Defining Emotional Abuse**

In further specifying the nature of childhood emotional abuse, consideration has been given to cultural standards of parenting conduct (Slep et al., 2011; Wekerle, 2011). Any definition of childhood emotional abuse—as is the case with other forms of abuse—involves cultural assumptions about appropriate parenting and human development (Esteban, 2006; Slep et al., 2011). The influence of these assumptions, however, is a complex issue. On the one hand, several authors (Bernstein, Harris, Long, Iida, & Hans, 2005; Elliott, Tong, & Tan, 1997; Glaser, 2002; Slep et al., 2011) noted that there is substantive agreement across cultures regarding the propriety of basic parental behaviors (e.g., providing a safe environment, responding to the child's emotional and physical needs, and refraining from having sexual intercourse with the child). In support of this view, researchers (Bernstein et al., 2005; Elliott et al., 1997; Thombs et al., 2007) observed similarities across cultural groups in definitions and experiences of child abuse. Likewise, Slep et al. (2011) cited an international agreement on child rights by member states of the United Nations as evidence of cross-cultural overlap in assumptions about proper parenting and child abuse.

On the other hand, numerous authors (McEachern et al., 2008; Roer-Strier, 2001; Slep et al., 2011) argued that assumptions about parenting might differ by cultural

group, thereby yielding dissimilar conceptions of childhood abuse across groups. Gough (1996), for example, recorded the views of Japanese individuals, who perceived cruelty in Westerners' practice of leaving infants by themselves at night to sleep. Relatedly, Elliott et al. (1997) recruited participants from different cultural groups in Singapore ( $N = 401$ ; 78.3% Chinese, 14.5% Malay, 5.5% Indian, 1.7% other) and found widespread disagreement on whether verbal threats of abandonment, name-calling, and constant criticisms constituted abuse. Furthermore, it is possible that the same parental behavior can have different outcomes for children in different cultures (Thombs et al., 2007). Along this line, Deater-Deckard, Dodge, Bates, and Pettit (1996) found that a harsh parental discipline style (consisting of physically and verbally aggressive acts) was associated with adverse outcomes for children in some cultural groups but not others. In view of such cultural variations, Esteban (2006) and Slep et al. (2011) concluded that emotionally abusive behaviors must be considered within the context of cultural norms of parenting conduct.

For the purposes of this review, then, childhood emotional abuse is defined as a pattern of hostile verbal or nonverbal behaviors, apart from physical contact, which is directed toward a child by an adult, endangers the child's psychological and/or physical well-being, and violates cultural norms of parenting conduct (Crosson-Tower, 1999; Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994; McGee & Wolfe, 1991; Slep et al., 2011). Within the cultural context of the United States, commonly recognized forms of emotional abuse include the repeated humiliation, derogation, and intimidation of children by adults (Alloy, Abramson, Smith, Gibb, & Neeren, 2006; Gibb, Abramson, & Alloy, 2004; Nicholas & Bieber, 1997). Given the focus of this article on reporting issues, we

emphasize definitions of emotional abuse as encoded in state laws—despite the importance of understanding and exploring cultural variations presented by students and their families. As Wekerle (2011) argued, parents are ultimately accountable to laws and definitions of abuse in their current place of residence, even if these definitions vary from cultural traditions of their country of origin. Moreover, school counselors are legally protected from liability when making a report as long as the report was pursuant to state law (Remley & Herlihy, 2005).

### **Research on Childhood Emotional Abuse**

Researchers found that emotional abuse can have dire consequences for children; in fact, on some outcomes, emotional abuse appears to be more damaging than other forms of abuse (e.g., Croyle & Waltz, 2007; Etain et al., 2010). In this section, we begin with a discussion of how commonly cases of emotional abuse occur relative to other forms of abuse. Second, detail is provided on the relationships among emotional abuse and adverse psychosocial outcomes. We believe it is beneficial for school counselors to review thoroughly the empirical findings on this topic, in order to discern the seriousness of this form of maltreatment.

### **Rates of Emotional Abuse**

Studies yielded dissimilar pictures regarding the frequency of occurrence of emotional abuse cases—a divergence that may be attributable to differences in the measures of emotional abuse employed by researchers. For example, Sedlak et al. (2010) found a relatively low incidence of emotional abuse during a one-year period, after analyzing reports of child abuse made to CPS agencies and non-CPS professionals in a nationwide sample. In this study, researchers estimated that 4

children per 1,000 were victims of emotional abuse over a one-year period (based on the Endangerment Standard, which includes children currently harmed by maltreatment and those at risk for future harm as a result of maltreatment). Their findings further indicated that emotional abuse was less common than physical abuse but more common than sexual abuse: emotional abuse was involved in 36% of all child abuse cases; physical abuse, by comparison, was involved in 57% of all child abuse cases, and sexual abuse, 22% of all cases.

Numerous authors, however, commented that such studies, which are based fully or in part on reports to CPS agencies, may be misleading (Barnett, Manly, & Cicchetti, 1991; Bryant, 2009; Carleton, 2006). As discussed above, school counselors have more difficulty in recognizing and reporting emotional abuse than other types of abuse (Bryant, 2009). Moreover, Hamarman, Pope, and Czaja (2002) found that, compared to other types of abuse, emotional abuse has the highest variability in the number of cases reported from state to state. Thus, CPS agency records may not provide a very sensitive or reliable measure of the prevalence of emotional abuse.

A more accurate estimate of frequency may be based on retrospective reports by adults, who are asked to reflect on their childhood abusive experiences, or on self-reports of parents themselves. Along this line, Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop (1991) found that 63% of parents ( $N = 3,346$ ; 63% female; no racial/ethnic information reported) recalled emotionally abusing a child in the previous year. The average number of emotionally abusive acts reported by parents was 12.6. In a retrospective study of 100 female college students (predominantly Caucasian; mean age = 21), Paivio and McCulloch (2004) reported that 44% of participants had experienced emotional abuse

during childhood—a rate approximately twice that of physical abuse (23%) and sexual abuse (20%). Similarly, Tietjen et al. (2010) found that 38% of patients from a clinical sample ( $N = 1,348$ ; mean age = 41) had a history of childhood emotional abuse, compared to 21% of participants who reported a history of physical abuse, and 25% of participants, who reported a history of sexual abuse. Thus, the prevalence of childhood emotional abuse may be, in fact, much higher than rates of sexual or physical abuse.

In regard to cultural differences in prevalence rates, the research in this area is relatively sparse, compared to the amount of research on cultural variables associated with physical or sexual abuse (Scher, Forde, McQuaid, & Stein, 2004). Moreover, findings are somewhat mixed: Thombs et al. (2007), for example, analyzed retrospective self-report data from two randomly selected samples of adults ( $N = 832$  and  $N = 967$ ). After controlling for the influence of several demographic characteristics of participants (i.e., age, marital status, education level, and sex), these researchers found no difference between White and Black adults in childhood emotional abuse. In a similar research design ( $N = 967$ ), however, Scher et al. (2004) reported that White participants were twice as likely as Black participants to have experienced emotional abuse, after controlling for the effects of education level and biological sex. In view of such disparate results, more research is needed to support comparisons of prevalence rates across cultural groups.

### **Childhood Emotional Abuse and Adverse Outcomes**

It could be argued that the distress caused by emotional abuse is betrayed by the very existence of oft-repeated adages, which implore us to believe that “words will never hurt me” (Teicher, Samson, Polcari, & McGreenery, 2006). In fact, emotional abuse may

be especially damaging to children. In some studies, researchers found that emotional abuse is more strongly related than physical or sexual abuse to psychological difficulties, such as self-injurious behaviors (Croyle & Waltz, 2007), bipolar disorder (Etain et al., 2010), emotional dysregulation (Burns, Jackson, & Harding, 2010), eating disorders (Kent, Waller, & Dagnan, 1999), depression and anxiety (Kent & Waller, 1998), and personality disorders (Grilo & Masheb, 2002). The preferential relationship between emotional abuse and adverse outcomes is perhaps most consistently seen in research on pessimistic explanatory style. Pessimistic explanatory style—a cognitive predictor of depression (Abela, 2001; Fresco, Alloy, & Reilly-Harrington, 2006; Gibb & Abela, 2008)—refers to an individual's tendency to construe the causes of negative events as stable in duration (rather than temporary), global in their influence over multiple domains of life functioning (rather than impacting only a select few domains), and located within, or internal to, the person (rather than in the external environment; Abela, 2001; Peterson & Park, 2007). In several studies, researchers found that emotional abuse, but not sexual or physical abuse, was related to pessimistic explanatory style (or a conceptually similar variant of this construct, negative cognitive style; Gibb, 2002; Gibb et al., 2001; Gibb et al., 2004; Gibb, Alloy, Abramson, & Marx, 2003; Hankin, 2005). In view of such findings, school counselors must remain sensitive to the seriousness of this form of abuse, its potential impact on children, and the necessity for well-informed intervention efforts.

### **Issues in Reporting and Intervention by School Counselors**

In line with the American School Counselor Association (hereinafter, ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2005), school counselors may address emotional abuse through

interventions at a variety of levels, including individual or group counseling with targeted students and parents, teacher/staff education programs, and the facilitation of outside referrals. School counselors also have responsibility to report suspected cases of emotional abuse. In the following sections, we discuss these roles and responsibilities, as related to the issue of emotional abuse, and provide recommendations for intervening at various levels.

### **Reporting Suspected Emotional Abuse**

Legal and ethical requirements call for school counselors to report suspected cases of child abuse to the appropriate state agency; confidentiality may be broken in instances of suspected abuse (ASCA, 2004; Lambie, 2005). Most states include emotional abuse, or “mental injury,” among the types of child abuse that must be reported, if suspected by a school professional (Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). Several authors, however, commented on the wide variability in reporting laws across states (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Hamarman et al., 2002; Horton & Cruise, 2001; Lambie, 2005; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). Remarkably, reporting laws specific to emotional abuse do not exist in all states. For example, as Baker (2009) and Lambie (2005) noted, the state of Georgia does not currently have laws addressing emotional abuse. Therefore, it is critical for school counselors to become conversant with the laws particular to their states (Marshall, 2012). One helpful website is the Child Welfare Information Gateway (<http://www.childwelfare.gov>), which allows visitors to view the child abuse reporting laws of each state.

School counselors must also remain alert to the possibility of inconsistencies, or dilemmas, between their ethical and legal duties. In addition to the obvious dilemma of

whether to breach confidentiality in order to protect students from harm (Remley & Herlihy, 2005), there may be instances when a decision to report suspected emotional abuse is supported by ethical considerations (ASCA, 2004) but not by particular definitions of child abuse in state law. As mentioned above, the definitions of emotional abuse in state law are highly variable and, in some instances, nonexistent. If, for example, the state fails to reference emotional abuse in its statutes on child abuse, then school counselors may not have a legal basis for breaching confidentiality and carrying out ethical duties of protecting students (Remley & Herlihy, 2005). In such instances, as is the case for handling legal and ethical dilemmas more generally, consultation with colleagues and lawyers may be important steps in the decision-making process.

**Determining a reportable level of suspicion.** Given the legal mandate in many states requiring school counselors to report suspected cases of childhood emotional abuse to the appropriate governmental agency, the key question remains: What constitutes a suspected case of childhood emotional abuse? As Bryant (2009) stated: “What is a reportable level of suspicion?” (p. 339). In part, as noted above, the answer to this question will depend on the specifics of reporting laws in a given state (Marshall, 2012). A suspected case of emotional abuse is one that is consistent with the definition of emotional abuse provided in a particular state’s reporting laws.

Often, however, the state-level reporting laws are vague in their definition of emotional abuse (Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). Further, when a description of emotional abuse is provided, reporting laws tend to define this behavior in terms of its adverse effects upon the child (e.g., severe anxiety, depression, reduced psychological and cognitive functioning). For example, in the state of Colorado, emotional abuse is

defined by law as “an identifiable and substantial impairment or a substantial risk of impairment of the child’s intellectual or psychological functioning or development” (statute 19-1-103; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). This emphasis on the effects of emotional abuse is problematic, in that it frequently fails to differentiate emotional abuse from other forms of abuse. Arguably, all three forms of abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse) could give rise to impairment of a child’s intellectual or psychological functioning. Moreover, some effects of emotional abuse, such as pessimistic explanatory style, might not be immediately apparent. As authors (Lambie, 2005; Slep et al., 2011) described, there can be long-term as well as short-term consequences. Thus, if a school counselor were to look only for outcomes of parental behaviors, there could be minimal guidance in distinguishing an instance of suspected emotional abuse.

It may be more useful, therefore, to begin with the parental behavior and classify its form. For example, school counselors might consider the following question: Is this behavior a contact or non-contact form of aggression? If it is a non-contact form of behavior (e.g., verbal assault), then emotional abuse might be a proper classification for conceptualizing it. The next step would involve discerning whether the non-contact parental behavior reaches the threshold for a suspected case of emotional abuse. This step, of course, requires complex and careful professional judgments (Marshall, 2012), as will be described below. School counselors, however, should first be reminded that it is their duty (in most states) to report *suspected* cases of abuse—rather than render a judgment about whether behavior actually is abuse (Horton & Cruise, 2001). In this sense, some degree of imprecision is to be expected at this stage, and many state laws

reflect an emphasis on avoiding false-negative cases of child abuse—that is, instances of determining that abuse has not occurred when, in fact, it has—at the time of reporting.

In deciding whether cases meet the threshold for a reportable level of suspicion, Horton and Cruise (2001) commented that the central question should be: Is the child endangered by this behavior? The term *endangerment* is inclusive of both current harm experienced by the child and the potential for future harm, as a result of the maltreatment (Sedlak et al., 2010). A similar standard for reporting is sometimes written into reporting laws at the state level (e.g., reporting laws of California). Toward assessing the level of child endangerment in relation to non-contact parental behaviors, school counselors may attend to a variety of issues, such as the intent behind parental behaviors (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000), current harm experienced by the child (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Romeo, 2000; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004), parental risk factors for engaging in emotional abuse (Glaser & Prior, 1997; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004), and severity of parental behavior (American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children [APSAC], 1996; Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Marshall, 2012).

Intent pertains to the issue of whether a parent enacted the behavior with a desire to hurt the child in some way (Hamarman & Bernet, 2000). Current harm, as noted above, may involve adverse psychological outcomes, such as emotional dysregulation, depression and anxiety (Burns et al., 2010; Kent & Waller, 1998). Psychosomatic complaints may also be reported by students who experience emotional abuse (Lynch & Browne, 1997; McGee & Wolfe, 1991). Commonly referenced parental

risk factors for engaging in emotional abuse include substance/alcohol abuse and mental illness (Glaser & Prior, 1997; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004).

The severity of parental behaviors may be judged along several dimensions, including dimensions of chronicity (i.e., the continuation of the parental behavior over time), frequency (i.e., the number of occurrences during a period of time), and extremeness (i.e., the extent to which a parental behavior deviates from social norms of proper parenting; Marshall, 2012). Extremeness, for example, may be illustrated in the situation of a parent telling a child “to go and commit suicide.” Such statements are generally understood to represent a larger and more obvious departure from North American norms of proper parenting, compared, for instance, to calling a child an “idiot.” The dimension of extremeness, however, may be difficult to discern, given that it hinges on indistinct standards of social norms, which can vary, as noted above, depending on the cultural group (Slep et al., 2011) and characteristics (e.g., level of cognitive development) of the child involved (Marshall, 2012).

Although all of the aforementioned indicators for endangerment (current harm, parental intent, parental risk factors, and severity) provide valuable information, we recommend that school counselors prioritize issues of severity as a necessary condition of suspected emotional abuse. The presence of current harm to the child would certainly be suggestive of child endangerment, but, as described above, not all cases of emotional abuse are associated with observable forms of current harm. For example, the effects of emotional abuse may be intangible (e.g., explanatory style) or delayed in emergence (Glaser, 2011; Slep et al., 2011). Likewise, awareness of parental risk factors (e.g., substance abuse) can sensitize school counselors to predictors of

emotional abuse, but, of course, parents may perpetuate emotional abuse without evidencing such risk factors. The criterion of parental intent, too, may present difficulties in the assessment of child endangerment. Hamarman and Bernet (2000) and Twaite and Rodriguez-Srednicki (2004) noted that emotional abuse can occur without malicious parental intent: parents may believe that verbal assaults on a child's character actually help the child by creating a "thick skin," or, alternatively, a parent's struggle with mental illness or substance abuse may confuse the issue of intent. Thus, the absence of cruel intent, parental risk factors, or current harm does not rule out the possibility of child endangerment.

We recommend, therefore, that school counselors emphasize the severity criterion (i.e., issues of chronicity, frequency, and extremeness) in assessing child endangerment in emotional abuse cases. As noted above, emotional abuse is generally conceptualized as an ongoing pattern of non-contact aggression, rather than one or two isolated incidents (Glaser & Prior, 1997; Horton & Cruise, 2001; Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004). Glaser and Prior (1997) argued that "the significant harm threshold is reached when the balance between good-enough and unacceptable interaction is skewed so as to render the abusive aspects *typical* of the relationship" (p. 323). School counselors may be particularly well positioned to assess dimensions of chronicity and frequency, relative to other mental health professionals, who interact with a child perhaps once per week or more seldom (Romeo, 2000). The chronicity and frequency of parental behaviors, however, must be considered alongside the extremeness of the behavior (Marshall, 2012); after all, considerations relevant to extremeness could supersede them in the school counselor's judgment. As underscored previously, some

emotionally abusive behaviors are so deviant from social norms (e.g., confining a child in a small space for days) that a school counselor may not need to question whether multiple instances have occurred before reporting it (Twaite & Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2004).

In sum, school counselors are encouraged to consider the following questions, when discerning whether a case constitutes a suspected instance of emotional abuse: (1) Is the behavior consistent with the definitions of abuse articulated in state law? (2) Is the parental behavior non-contact in form? (3) Is the child endangered by the parental behavior? Toward addressing this third issue, the school counselor may ask whether the parental behaviors are severe (i.e., chronic, frequent, and/or extreme in nature). School counselors can also assess parental intent to harm, parental risk factors, and current adverse effects upon the child, although these indicators, as argued above, are not necessary conditions for emotional abuse. If the school counselor believes that parental behavior conforms to legal definitions of emotional abuse, is non-contact in form, and endangers the child on account of, at least, the severity of the behavior, then the case is likely to reach a reportable level of suspicion for emotional abuse. In order to assist school counselors in recalling these central issues during assessments, we created the following mnemonic device: LENS. Each letter of this acronym pertains to an issue involved in recognizing cases of emotional abuse: L = Local laws on emotional abuse; E = Endangerment of the child; N = Non-contact form of abuse; and S = Severity of parental behaviors.

**Aspects of a report.** Some states have reporting laws that specify the agency to which reports of suspected child abuse should be directed, as well as the information

one should convey in making such a report (Lambie, 2005). In most states, school counselors have no need to provide evidence to governmental agencies that a child has suffered emotionally abusive behaviors. Horton and Cruise (2001) recommended that school counselors obtain only enough detail to determine whether abuse may be suspected. Typically, in making a report, school counselors describe to agency personnel the type of abuse suspected, reasons for suspecting abuse, harm potentially caused by abuse, names and addresses of the child and parent/guardian, any interventions made by the reporter, and concerns reported by other professionals in regard to the child (Horton & Cruise, 2001; Lambie, 2005).

It is also advisable for school counselors to be aware of school resources and policies related to reporting. In many schools, personnel must consult with an administrator before making a report to the appropriate agency (Horton & Cruise, 2001). Other schools require that school counselors notify an administrator after a report has been made. Certainly, consultation with other counselors, school psychologists, or administrators is often well advised in these situations—and even ethically mandated, in cases where a counselor is uncertain about a decision to breach confidentiality (ASCA, 2004). On the other hand, there is concern that requiring administrative consultation may delay response time to child abuse cases or discourage reporting suspected child abuse cases (Horton & Cruise, 2001). Ultimately, school counselors are encouraged to negotiate these issues with administrators, in order to arrive at policies that do not detract from compliance with the duty to report suspected instances of child abuse.

## Implications for School Counseling

Beyond developing competencies in the identification and reporting of emotional abuse, school counselors should be prepared to intervene directly with students who are emotionally abused and assist fellow school professionals in identifying emotional abuse. In the following section, we provide practical implications for conducting emotional abuse assessments and helping students with emotional abuse.

Subsequently, we offer suggestions for parental consultations and recommendations for training workshops on this topic for faculty, administrators, and staff.

**Assessment.** In helping students with emotional abuse, a critical first step involves gathering information about parental behaviors. The age of the student is a key consideration in assessing experiences of childhood emotional abuse. For secondary-level students, assessments that rely on language will likely be appropriate (Hewitt, 2012). In line with suggestions above, school counselors can inquire about the type of abuse (e.g., non-contact in form) and child endangerment issues (e.g., severity, parental intent, parental risk factors, and adverse influences; APSAC, 1996; Bernstein et al., 1997; Horton & Cruise, 2001; Keashly & Harvey, 2005; Marshall, 2012; McGee & Wolfe, 1991). School counselors may also consider utilizing formal assessments that tap into abuse issues (Lipschitz, Bernstein, Winegar, & Southwick, 1999). For example, the Childhood Experiences of Violence Questionnaire has several questions that ask about current emotionally abusive experiences (Walsh, MacMillam, Trocmé, Jamieson, & Boyle, 2008). Lipschitz et al. (1999) discussed the potential for some adolescents to avoid sharing information about abuse in a face-to-face session and, consequently, noted the value of standardized assessment instruments. Potentially, some adolescents

may hold back in an in-person session, due to embarrassment (Leander, Granhag, & Christianson, 2005; Lipschitz et al., 1999)

For elementary-level children and children with intellectual disabilities, school counselors may need to approach assessment of emotional abuse in a different manner (Hewitt, 2012). Certainly, many children respond well to verbal questions and are capable of expressing themselves verbally, but counselors may need to exercise care in the type and context of such questions. For example, it can be facilitative to begin with open-ended questions about non-abuse issues. Researchers found that asking children to respond first to topics unrelated to abuse was helpful in later eliciting information about children's experiences of abuse (Sternberg et al., 1997). In general, use of open-ended questions may increase child disclosure of abuse (Patterson & Pipe, 2009). School counselors should also instruct children to ask for clarification, if they do not understand a question, as young children may fail to correct a misunderstanding without explicit instruction to do so (Orbach, Hershkowitz, Lamb, Esplin, & Horowitz, 2000; Patterson & Pipe, 2009).

For some children, however, it is beneficial to use assessment methods that do not rely primarily on verbal expression. In such instances, observation of parent-child interaction in a play therapy setting can be informative (Hewitt, 2012). Counselors can attend to potential indicators of emotional abuse in parental communications and behaviors, such as hostility (Calam, Bolton, Barrowclough, & Roberts, 2002). School counselors may also consider the use of art as a way to assist children in disclosing abuse. Children can make use of art and other creative media as a supplement or substitute for verbal expression (Malchiodi, 2012).

**Intervention.** As the ASCA (2005) National Model specifies, the school counseling delivery system includes responsive services, such as counseling and referral. School counselors are tasked with addressing the personal/social development of students (ASCA, 2005); this domain could include difficulties that emerge for students in association with emotional abuse, such as self-injurious behaviors, emotional dysregulation, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, and pessimistic explanatory style (Burns et al., 2010; Croyle & Waltz, 2007; Gibb & Abela, 2008; Kent et al., 1999; Kent & Waller, 1998). In determining the appropriate level of intervention (e.g., group counseling, family counseling, individual counseling, or outside referral), school professionals must consider several issues: (a) competency and training of the counselor; (b) available resources and time; (c) and student suitability (Brassard, Rivelis, & Diaz, 2009). For example, school counselors would need to ascertain whether it is viable to provide individual counseling in the school setting for issues related to emotional abuse, due to possible limitations on resources and time. Group interventions may be more manageable for many school counselors, although, in this case, too, certain considerations must be met (e.g., school counselor's competency in group interventions for this particular topic area, availability of other students in need of such an intervention, and determinations regarding whether students can function adequately in a group setting; Brassard et al., 2009). In many cases, the school counselor will determine that a student is best suited for outside referral, given the severity of a student's difficulties and the need for consistent, intensive intervention (Brassard et al., 2009).

If, however, school counselors determine that students who are emotionally-abused are suitable for intervention within the school context, individual and group-level interventions are available. The type of intervention, of course, would depend on the particular psychological difficulties experienced by the student in relation to emotional abuse. As noted previously, emotional abuse has been linked with a range of adverse outcomes (Burns et al., 2010; Croyle & Waltz, 2007; Etain et al., 2010; Gibb & Abela, 2008; Gibb et al., 2004; Gibb et al., 2003; Gibb et al., 2001; Grilo & Masheb, 2002; Hankin, 2005; Kent et al., 1999; Kent & Waller, 1998; Steinberg, Gibb, Alloy, & Abramson, 2003). In the following section, we discuss interventions for addressing two of these outcomes: pessimistic explanatory style and anxiety.

***Interventions for pessimistic explanatory style.*** Pessimistic explanatory style is commonly linked with a history of emotional abuse, as described above (Gibb & Abela, 2008; Gibb et al., 2004; Gibb et al., 2003; Gibb et al., 2001; Hankin, 2005; Steinberg et al., 2003). If students who are emotionally-abused appear to manifest characteristics of a pessimistic explanatory style (specifically, the attribution of negative events to stable, global, and internal causes), school counselors may consider aspects of cognitive style as a target for intervention. Researchers examined various cognitive interventions for addressing pessimistic explanatory style, with promising results reported for Self-Administered Optimism Training (SOT; Fresco, Moore, Walk, & Craighead, 2009) and the Apex Project (Seligman, Schulman, DeRubeis, & Hollon, 1999). These interventions assist individuals in altering interpretations of events (e.g., modifying the belief that negative events are caused by internal, stable, and global forces; Fresco et al., 2009; Seligman et al., 2009). Although originally developed for

young adult populations, such interventions could be tailored for group work in the secondary school setting, given that both adolescents and young adults have typically developed cognitive capabilities for abstract thought and reflection on thought patterns (Piaget, 2001; Sauter, Heyne, & Westenberg, 2009). For example, in using strategies similar to SOT training, school counseling groups could feature activities in which students develop a wide range of potential causes for events—causes which may vary in their degree of internality, globality, and stability (Fresco et al., 2009).

Another group-level intervention focuses on the globality dimension of pessimistic explanatory style. Globality, as mentioned above, refers to the belief that the cause of an event impacts all areas of life (Abela, 2001; Peterson & Park, 2007). For example, if a student experiences a negative event (e.g., suffers emotional abuse), he/she may believe that the cause of this event (e.g., one's own "stupidity") is total in its reach, impacting all areas of a student's life. One way to undermine such beliefs would involve helping students develop confidence, or self-efficacy, in their abilities to complete other tasks successfully (Bandura, 1997). An experience of mastery in domain-specific tasks (e.g., social abilities, athletic abilities, or creative arts abilities) would provide evidence for the student's own competence and, therefore, reason to discount the previous belief that certain causes of negative events adversely impact all domains of life functioning (Wick, Wick, & Peterson, 1997). Unlike other mental health professionals, school counselors have the ability to work closely with other professionals (e.g., teachers and coaches) in devising such tasks. In partnering with physical education teachers, for example, school counselors could facilitate cooperative, non-competitive activities for groups of students (Wick et al., 1997), where

students can identify strengths in different domains and modify the maladaptive beliefs of a pessimistic explanatory style.

***Interventions for anxiety.*** As noted above, emotional abuse has also been associated with elevated anxiety (Kent & Waller, 1998). When working individually with students who struggle with anxiety, a school counselor may incorporate interventions from Modular Cognitive Behavior Therapy (Chorpita, Taylor, Franciz, Moffitt, & Austin, 2004). This model emphasizes four strategies, as described by Chorpita et al. (2004): (a) ranking of fears, (b) psychoeducation on anxiety, (c) imaginal or in-vivo exposure to fears, and (d) skill maintenance methods. First, and in an ongoing manner, school counselors work with students in creating a “Fear Ladder,” wherein students rank-order different levels of fears in relation to specific situations (Chorpita et al., 2004, p. 273). School counselors then provide cognitive-based education on the nature of anxiety and strategies for handling it (Chorpita et al., 2004).

Following this education, students engage in in-vivo or imaginal exposure exercises (Chorpita et al., 2004). For example, in conducting imaginal exercises for test anxiety, a school counselor may have a student first imagine sitting in a specific class to take a test. Finally, school counselors help students in implementing and repeating anxiety-reduction strategies, which were learned as part of Modular CBT (Chorpita et al., 2004). Given that this intervention, too, requires the capacity for abstract thought (e.g., imaginal exposure), it appears best suited for students at the secondary level, although Chorpita et al. (2004) implemented it with students as young as 7 years old.

If group interventions are deemed preferable, school counselors may utilize the Benson Henry Institute Relaxation Response (BHI RR) protocol (Foret et al., 2012).

This intervention, as described by Foret et al. (2012), includes eight sessions (45 minutes/session) over a period of 4 weeks. Benson (2000) described the Relaxation Response (RR), as “a dramatic decrease in heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure (if elevated to begin with) and metabolic rate—the exact opposite effects of the fight-or-flight response” (p. xvii). In order to help individuals develop RR, two main conditions are crucial: (a) a “mental device,” such as a repetitive phrase, word, or focus on an external object; and (b) an attitude of self-kindness, acceptance, and focus (Benson, 2000, p. xviii).

School counselors can teach conditions of RR through a variety of techniques (e.g., progressive muscle relaxation and mindfulness meditative exercises). Additionally, they may want to encourage students to engage in homework practice of these skills (Foret et al., 2012). Other potentially helpful components of BHI RR involved identifying and altering thought patterns that increase stress (Foret et al., 2012). Although this latter element likely demands a more mature stage of cognitive development, other aspects of the model, such as mindfulness meditative exercises, have been used with students as young as the elementary level (Flook et al., 2010).

***Interventions involving parents.*** As Hall (2003) noted, parental consultations are an important activity for school counselors. When deciding whether or not to involve parents in responsive services, school counselors should consider several issues, such as the counselor’s training in family strategies and parents’ readiness to participate (Brassard et al., 2009). In many cases, referral to an outside agency may be preferable, where parents and children can receive specialty services in family counseling.

Alternatively, however, school counselors may determine that school-based intervention models, which include parents, would be beneficial (Brassard et al., 2009).

Many intervention programs for emotional abuse include parents in the treatment model (e.g., Barlow & McMillan, 2010; Ginsberg, 2002). For example, Filial Relationship Enhancement therapy has been recommended as a treatment model for children struggling with abuse (e.g., Ginsberg, 2002). In applying this approach, the elementary school counselor trains parents in new strategies for joining children in play.

Specifically, the counselor invites parents “to suspend their judgment, accept and acknowledge their child, and create a safe context for both their child and themselves through structuring and limit setting” (Ginsberg, 2002, p. 70). The model is based on principles of child-centered play therapy, which includes a focus on empathy and acceptance (Cochran, Nordling, & Cochran, 2010; Ginsberg, 2002).

Moreover, when working with parents on the topic of emotional abuse, school counselors are encouraged to acknowledge different cultural images for successful parenting. As Roer-Strier (2001) observed, such efforts may assist counselors and parents in understanding conflicts between cultural values and in helping parents learn new behaviors. Toward this end, Glaser (2002) highlighted the use of vignettes with parents, which describe parent-child interactions and provide concrete examples of cultural differences in parenting. It can also be important to discuss cultural variation in expectations about the role of the government in family affairs. Elliott et al. (1997), for instance, noted that many individuals from Asian cultures assume that family issues are private and, further, that parents are free to choose how to rear children. The threshold

for governmental intervention in the American context, therefore, may be another source of confusion or conflict for families from another culture.

**Training for teachers, administrators, and staff.** Authors (Bryant, 2009; Lambie, 2005) suggested that school counselors should also focus on educating teachers, administrators, and staff in the recognition of emotional abuse. Romeo (2000) noted that many training programs focus on physical and sexual abuse rather than emotional abuse. It may be beneficial, therefore, for school counselors to provide education for other school professionals on distinguishing characteristics of emotional abuse, prevalence rates, adverse outcomes associated with emotional abuse, and recommendations for recognizing and reporting emotional abuse—similar to trainings recommended for addressing child maltreatment, in general (Lambie, 2005). The criteria discussed above, alongside the LENS acronym, could be introduced as helpful tools for determining the reportable threshold for suspected emotional abuse (APSAC, 1996; Hamarman & Bernet, 2000; Marshall, 2012).

As part of this school-based training, case studies may also be useful. Both elementary and secondary school counselors could create hypothetical case scenarios and ask other school professionals to consider how they would respond to each case. Marshall (2012) provided several case studies related to emotional abuse, which could be adapted for school-based training programs on emotional abuse. For example, in modifying one of the case studies by Marshall (2012), school counselors could present the case of elementary school student who was subjected to solitary confinement for extended periods due to parental fears for the child's safety. This example might serve, in particular, to emphasize the point that emotionally abusive behaviors do not depend

on malicious intent from the parent (as discussed above). Moreover, this case could be used to exemplify the non-contact nature of emotional abuse and indicators of severity (e.g., frequency and duration of confinement). Depending on the school level, counselors could also provide age-specific recommendations for gathering information and conducting assessments, as detailed above.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future researchers could explore several areas related to school counselors' response to childhood emotional abuse. For example, counselor educators could assess the effectiveness of graduate training interventions, such as presentations on the LENS model, in increasing trainee competencies for identifying and reporting emotional abuse. Such research could be extended to graduate training programs for teachers and school administrators, as well. In addition, future researchers could examine the extent to which reporting practices of school counselors align with local laws on emotional abuse. Given the variability in state definitions of emotional abuse, as mentioned above, it may be that school counselors struggle to report cases of emotional abuse that are consistent with legal definitions of abuse. A case study approach to the research design, which features some cases that are consistent with state laws on emotional abuse and others that are not, may be useful.

### **Conclusion**

Childhood emotional abuse is an exceedingly difficult behavior to define. Many school counselors struggle in recognizing and reporting this form of child abuse. Both researchers and theorists suggested that, on certain outcomes, emotional abuse is as damaging as other forms of abuse—if not more so. In view of the serious nature of

emotional abuse, school counselors must be knowledgeable about this form of maltreatment and prepared to report suspected cases. We discussed four central issues (specifically, issues related to state laws on emotional abuse, the non-contact form of abusive behaviors, child endangerment, and the severity of parental behaviors), which may assist counselors in discerning whether cases of emotional abuse meet the threshold for a reportable level of suspicion. Additionally, school counselors may address the issue of emotional abuse through teacher/staff trainings, individual and group interventions with students and parents, and the facilitation of referrals for outside care.

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