

Abuse, Harassment, And Neglect: The Pain Of Emotional Injuries

By Lindsey Barton

What Is Abuse?

Your child is being abused when someone uses his or her power or position to harm them emotionally, physically, or sexually.

Emotional Abuse

- Is a verbal attack on a child's self esteem by a person in a position of power, authority, or trust such as a parent or coach
- Occurs even if the attack is intended as a form of discipline or is not intended by the adult to cause harm
- Takes many forms, including any of the following:
 - Name calling ("Hey, Fatty!" or "Hey, Shorty" or "Hey, Mr. Klutz")
 - Threatening ("If you don't win, you can forget about me buying that new CD you want")
 - Insulting ("You're stupid" or "You're clumsy" or "You're an embarrassment to our family" or "You don't deserve to wear that uniform.")
 - Criticizing or ridiculing ("You are a loser" or "I thought you were better than that. I guess I was wrong.")
 - Intimidating ("Watch out kid, my son is going to break your nose")
 - Yelling at a child for losing or not playing up to the adult's expectations
 - Hazing
 - Questioning ("Why didn't you win?" or "How could you let that guy beat you?")
 - Shunning or withholding love or affection (not speaking to, hugging, or comforting your child after she plays poorly in a game or practice, or her team loses; showing obvious signs of disappointment)
 - Punishing a child for not playing up to your expectations or when her team loses

Physical Abuse

- Occurs when a person in a position of power, authority or trust such as a parent or coach purposefully injures or threatens to injure a child
- Takes many forms, including any of the following:
 - Slapping
 - Hitting
 - Shaking
 - Throwing equipment
 - Kicking
 - Pulling hair
 - Pulling ears
 - Striking
 - Shoving
 - Grabbing
 - Hazing
 - Punishing "poor" play or rules violations through the use of excessive exercise (extra laps etc.) or by [denying fluids](#)

Sexual Abuse

- Occurs when a person in a position of power, authority or trust engages in "sexualized" touching or sex with a child
- "Sexualized touching" is where touching, instead of being respectful and nurturing, is done in a sexual manner. Examples include:
 - Fondling instead of a hug
 - Long kiss on the lips instead of a peck on the cheek
 - Seductive stroking of any area of the child's body instead of a pat on the rear-end for a good play

What Is Harassment?

Your child is being harassed when she or he is threatened, intimidated, taunted, or subjected to racial, homophobic, or sexist slurs. Sexual harassment includes comments, contact or behavior of a sexual nature that is offensive, uninvited or unwelcome.

What Is Neglect?

Neglect is a chronic inattention to the basic necessities of life such as supervision, medical and dental care, adequate rest, safe environment, exercise, and fresh air.

Neglect in a sports setting make take the following forms:

- Injuries are not properly treated
- Athletes are forced to play hurt
- Equipment is inadequate, poorly maintained or unsafe
- Road trips are not properly supervised.

How Common Are Abuse, Harassment And Neglect?

According to a widely reported 1993 survey conducted by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission:

- Almost half (45.3%) of those surveyed (both males and females) said they had been emotionally abused while participating in sports (i.e. called names, yelled at, or insulted);
- Slightly more than 1 out of 6 (17.5%) said they had suffered physical abuse while playing sports (i.e. hit, kicked or slapped).
- More than 1 in 5 (21%) said they had been suffered neglect while playing sports (pressured to play with an injury)
- 1 in 12 (8%) said they had been sexually harassed while playing sports (called names with sexual connotations)
- 1 in 30 (3.4%) said they had been pressured into sex or sexual touching.

What Kind Of Damage Does Emotional Abuse Cause?

Perhaps because the damage caused by emotional abuse is not obvious, like sexual abuse, or immediately apparent, like a physical injury, its effect is often overlooked and minimized. But, experts say, the damage is no less real, and, in fact, may be much more damaging and long-lasting:

- Children are deeply affected by negative comments from parents, coaches and other adults they look up to and respect
- Children are much more sensitive than adults to criticism: being yelled at, put down, or embarrassed is much more likely to have negative psychological consequences and to cause the child to feel humiliated, shamed and degraded and damage her feeling of self-worth and self-esteem.
- If the abuse becomes chronic, a pattern of negative comments can destroy a child's spirit, motivation and self-esteem. Over time, the young athlete will begin to believe what adults say about them. Comments intended to improve athletic performance are likely to have precisely the opposite effect.
- As reported by Dr. Leonard Zaichowsky in the Fall/Winter 2000 issue of Sidelines, the newsletter of the [National Youth Sports Safety Foundation](#) "[r]esearch has substantiated that children who witness a violent act, such as parental aggression in sports, have negative and possible long-term consequences ... include[ing] lowered sense of social support, attachment, ... social involvement [and] exhibit behavior problems. ..." In extreme cases, reports Dr. Zaichowsky, children who have strong reactions to viewing violence or aggression could develop post-traumatic stress disorder, which is characterized by such symptoms as nightmares or flashbacks, routine avoidance of reminders of the event, increased sleep disturbances, irritability, poor concentration, startle reaction and regressive behavior.

According to an NYSSF Fact Sheet on Emotional Injuries, abuse or witnessing parental misconduct:

- Could adversely affect a child's ability to learn
- Increases the likelihood that the youth will engage in unhealthy behaviors, including suicidal behavior, and delinquent and aggressive behaviors, during adolescence
- Has been linked to adverse health outcomes in adulthood, including mood and anxiety disorders and diseases
- Will "turn off" the child to exercise and participation in sports, preventing the development of a healthy adult lifestyle.