



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCE RESEARCH, IDEAS AND INNOVATIONS IN TECHNOLOGY

ISSN: 2454-132X

Impact Factor: 6.078

(Volume 11, Issue 4 - V11I4-1149)

Available online at: <https://www.ijariit.com>

## The Psychological Effects of Emotional Neglect in Childhood

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### ABSTRACT

*Childhood emotional neglect (CEN) is not a result of physical abuse or visible injury, but rather stems from a deficiency of essential emotional care and affection. This essay examines the significant and enduring effects of emotional neglect on a child's development, emotional health, and the lasting emotional trauma it inflicts. It distinguishes emotional neglect from emotional abuse by emphasising its invisibility and the psychological harm it inflicts. The study underscores that such neglect can lead to enduring feelings of unworthiness and transdiagnostic mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and personality disorders. The study looks at the underlying causes, which are typically the product of emotionally immature or apathetic carers. It uses scholarly research to do this. Lastly, the study claims that recovery from emotional neglect is not only achievable but also fundamental, as it encourages increased awareness, early intervention, and the validation of experiences that are frequently overlooked.*

**Keywords:** *Childhood, Emotional, Psychological Trauma, Transdiagnostic, Neglect*

### INTRODUCTION

What makes a house a home? It's not just four walls and a roof, but the warmth of being seen, heard, and loved. For many children, a house is merely a structure where their physical needs are met, but emotionally, they are left starving.

"Emotional neglect refers to the failure to meet children's emotional needs, and includes for example the failure to provide adequate nurturance and affection, allowing children to be witnesses of domestic violence, to knowingly permit maladaptive behavior by the child, the failure to seek care for emotional or behavioral problems, and the failure to provide adequate structure." (Stoltenborgh et al. 345) It's like an invisible wound that shapes a child's sense of self, long before they could even name it. It's the quiet absence of comfort. A child should never beg their parents for love and affection, and in the silence of absence, many grow up to believe they are unworthy of either.

Children who grow up in emotionally neglected environments are often regarded as strong, but the sad reality is that the strength was just a mask, made their cries for help were ignored so often that they no longer open up to people. Kubala and Reynolds also said, "Emotional neglect can be just as harmful as more overt forms of abuse, and it can have long-lasting effects on a child's emotional and psychological development." (Kubala and Reynolds)

Unlike physical abuse, emotional neglect is often overlooked due to its signs being subtle and internal (e.g. low self-esteem, hyper-independence, etc), no cuts, bruises, wounds, only children who feel like they are "too much" or "not enough" at the same time. Without any external markers, these wounds go unnoticed for years, if not decades. In emotionally barren environments, the child learns to suppress their emotions and tell themselves that they need to learn how to grow without the support of a parent, not to seem "too needy" Over time, this emotional suppression turns into a coping mechanism.

Clinical psychologist Jonice Webb discusses the link between childhood emotional neglect, which often leads to deep-rooted guilt around self-care, causing individuals to prioritise others at the expense of their own needs. This compulsive self-sacrifice stems from a lack of emotional validation, making it difficult to recognise or value one's feelings in her book *Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect*. ("Running On Empty By Dr. Jonice Webb")

Ultimately, this research matters because emotional neglect affects millions, yet it goes unseen in homes, schools, and even therapy rooms. By shedding light on the **long-term psychological effects and consequences** of childhood emotional neglect, this research helps in forming a better understanding of the invisible trauma many carry from their childhood and how its effects silently continue into adulthood.

## **UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL NEGLECT: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EMOTIONAL NEGLECT AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE**

Emotional neglect refers to the failure to cater to the child's emotional needs, (e.g. never showing emotion while interacting with the child), it can also be difficult to spot and quantify, as many parents or caregivers find it hard to provide a safe and loving environment for their children when facing relationship difficulties, mental health problems or addiction issues. (Kumari )

Certain facets of emotional abuse, such as constant swearing, yelling, criticism or humiliation of a child, are easily noticeable, but others, such as unrealistic expectations or unreasonable demands on the child, or unfair treatment because of certain characteristics (e.g. physical disability, or appearance), are not always recognised. In some cases, these less apparent facets of emotional abuse may arise out of the childhood or lived experience of parents, caregivers, teachers and others, but still cause (unintended) harm to the child. (Kumari)

Emotional neglect isn't about what has been done, such as abuse, but about what was absent (eg, warmth, love, care, etc.)

Emotional abuse and emotional neglect, although both types of maltreatment, vary in how they are expressed and their effects.

Emotional abuse frequently includes: ("Child neglect and emotional abuse")

- i. Not providing the child with a safe environment
- ii. Letting the child witness violence or severe abuse between parents or adults
- iii. Threatening the child with violence or abandonment
- iv. Constantly criticising or blaming the child for problems.
- v. The child's parent or caregiver does not show concern for the child and refuses help from others for the child.

Such actions can result in distinct warning indicators in children, like "Child neglect and emotional abuse")

- i. Problems in school
- ii. Eating disorders, leading to weight loss or poor weight gain
- iii. Emotional issues such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety
- iv. Extreme behaviour such as acting out, trying hard to please, and aggressiveness
- v. Trouble sleeping
- vi. Vague physical complaints

Emotional neglect, on the other hand, tends to be characterised by a lack of active care or support by the caretaker; some examples are: (Gillette)

- i. lack of emotional support during difficult times or illness
- ii. Withholding or not showing affection, even when requested
- iii. disregard for a child's mental well-being
- iv. lack of intervention on the child's behalf (e.g., allowing behavioural problems to go unaddressed)
- v. social isolation
- vi. being emotionally unavailable or absent
- vii. ignoring a child

Due to these, the child may have the following effects: (Gillette)

- i. lack of confidence
- ii. social withdrawal
- iii. emotional volatility
- iv. difficulty controlling emotions
- v. Challenges in making and maintaining relationships
- vi. age-inappropriate behavior
- vii. Depression
- viii. Anxiety

In all, Emotional abuse includes overt and deliberate behaviours which are more apparent and simpler to identify. In contrast, emotional neglect is defined by a lack of emotional presence, offering silence rather than support.

A child who experiences neglect may not face insults or threats, but they might never receive love, acknowledgement, or a secure environment in which to express their feelings.

The key difference lies in the presence versus absence.

Abuse is the presence of mistreatment, while neglect is the absence of support.

This lack of visibility is an important side to why emotional neglect is so harmful. As supported by (Glickman et al. ), who said "One form of childhood adversity that has remained relatively understudied in its long-term mental health impact is emotional neglect".

There are no overt incidents to notice. Instead, the child slowly adopts the notion that their emotions don't matter or are a burden. Many people who endure emotional neglect may not recognise that anything was afoot until much later in life, often when they are confronted with emotional difficulties.

## **LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF CHILDHOOD NEGLECT ON ADULTS**

“Under the [Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003](#), emotional neglect in childhood is defined as a caregiver’s failure to act, resulting in a higher chance of serious harm for the minor.” (Gillette)

“Despite this changing nature, research findings demonstrate that children who continue to receive emotional support from their parents feel attached to them and care about their contributions and support.” (Gökçe and Yılmaz) This finding proves the statement that emotional neglect doesn’t just harm early development, but its effects persist into adolescence and adulthood.

As mentioned in (Gillette), these are the ways emotional neglect can present itself in adulthood:

- i. Inability to trust others
- ii. stress internalization
- iii. self-sufficiency
- iv. Fear of abandonment
- v. Lack of boundaries and other challenges in relationships
- vi. distorted sense of self

“In some cases, these less apparent facets of emotional abuse may arise out of the childhood or lived experience of parents, caregivers, teachers and others, but still cause (unintended) harm to the child.” (Kumari) This research shows a connection between unresolved trauma of parents, caregivers, teachers and how, even though emotional maltreatment took place in their childhood, its effects never ended and continued to affect another child.

In alliance with this, Gillette says, “Adults who’ve experienced emotional neglect in childhood may be more likely to repeat the patterns of neglect they were exposed to.” This depicts a horrible but real cycle, where, as suggested, adults who faced emotional neglect in their childhood unknowingly replicate and repeat the same patterns of neglect.

## **PARENTAL EMOTIONAL NEGLECT**

As said by (Kumari), “Parents or caregivers find it hard to provide a safe and loving environment for their children when facing relationship difficulties, mental health problems or addiction issues”

A few signs of emotionally neglectful behaviours from (Gillette) in a caregiver may include persistent:

- i. indifference toward the child
- ii. mindless behaviors
- iii. substance use
- iv. Blaming the child for challenges at home or school
- v. denying the existence of the child
- vi. viewing the child as “bad” or “worthless”
- vii. acting as if the child is a burden
- viii. using the child to satisfy personal emotional needs

Beth Tyson, a psychotherapist specialising in childhood trauma from Media, Pennsylvania, explains that

“Adults with unresolved trauma from their childhood will often be triggered by a child’s emotional needs... Especially if the adult experienced emotional neglect or abuse as a child. When we witness our children demanding a need to be met that was not met for us as children, it activates the old memories that the behaviour is unacceptable.” Creating an internal emotional conflict, which shows itself in ways of avoidance or dismissiveness towards emotions shown by their child. Tyson offers an example:

“Telling children, ‘It’s OK. Don’t cry. There’s nothing to cry about’ is a form of emotional neglect if it happens too frequently.”

Caregivers who are preoccupied, anxious, or overwhelmed may unintentionally create emotional distance. Tyson points to behaviours such as:

- i. invalidating children’s pain or emotional expression
- ii. using distractions to stifle or avoid emotional expression
- iii. allowing children to spend an abundance of time on electronics to “stay quiet”
- iv. avoiding eye contact with a child because you’re on your phone

These patterns teach children to seek external sources of comfort while also internalising their feelings, forming insecure attachments and even lifelong struggles with emotional regulation.

Another research by (Gökçe and Yılmaz) confirms the contrasting side, saying that emotional availability of parents plays a critical role in shaping an individual's psychological health. For example, it has been found in a study conducted with adolescents that children develop more constructive emotion regulation skills when a parent responds in an accepting and supportive manner.

These extracts show us another side of how emotional neglect is often not the result of bad-natured intent, but rather the chain of consequences of internal wounds, societal pressures. Regardless of where it comes from, the outcome remains the same, where the child learns that their emotions are either irrelevant or a burden, which in turn sets the stage for future psychological issues.

## **MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS ASSOCIATED WITH EMOTIONAL NEGLECT**

Children who go through emotional maltreatment are more at risk of developing psychological issues. Emotional neglect is a “transdiagnostic risk factor” for mental health disorders like anxiety and depression, often beginning from faulty emotional processing related to oneself and others, as said by (Kumari )

This link is supported by a study conducted in 2021 by (Glickman et al. ). Showing us that different levels of emotional neglect (ranging from mild to severe) were linked to symptoms of depression in adolescents by the age of 18. The connection was statistically significant even after incorporating other early-life adversities, like issues with maternal mental health or living in single-parent households, showing us the impact of emotional neglect as an indication of negative mental health outcomes.

This is in line with the results of another study by Gillette, demonstrating that going through emotional maltreatment (like emotional neglect) in childhood raises the risk of developing many disorders, personality disorders from clusters A, B, and C, depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. These effects often appear during adolescence and can continue into adulthood, oftentimes resulting in feelings of hopelessness, low self-worth, and a reduced sense of social support.

## **PATHWAYS TO HEALING AND RECOVERY**

“There is an urgent need for routine mental health screening and to consider emotional abuse in all current and future top-down and bottom-up approaches to address childhood maltreatment, as well as in potential interventions to ameliorate its adverse effects on the mental health and well-being of child and adolescent workers.” As said by (Pandey et al. ), this isn’t just true, but is long overdue. As emotional neglect is usually unnoticed and unintentional, but also has the power to leave emotional scars which aren’t visible to us in the form of trauma, but their effects in adulthood say otherwise.

“Research indicates that adults who experienced maltreatment during childhood typically exhibit a poorer response to conventional pharmacological treatments aimed at improving their mental health issues, such as depressive symptoms, and tend to benefit more from psychological therapies. This finding, along with evidence of the significant and negative mental health effects of emotional abuse and neglect, supports the need for developing and implementing psychological interventions, particularly those that address maladaptive emotional processes, to reverse or potentially prevent (if implemented promptly) detrimental mental health effects for children who have been maltreated.”. (Kumari)

Healing isn’t age-bound, and begins with acknowledging what was missing.

Hence, the first step is Self-awareness.

Reminding yourself that though your feelings were ignored, they are real and yours.

Then, on the steps as given by Gillette are as follows:

### **Cultivating self-compassion**

Self-compassion, in simpler words the art of being kind to yourself.

As mentioned, recognising that “you deserved to have those needs met, even if your parents were unable or unwilling to meet those needs.” It can help bring down the feeling of unworthiness.

### **Connecting with unconditional love**

If unconditional love was absent from your childhood, having a pet may help cultivate it.

“Pets and time in nature can give you the unconditional love you lacked as a child and have the benefit of feeling safer than relationships with humans,” suggests Psychotherapist Beth Tyson. Who further mentioned that “The pets can be a stepping stone to trusting people.” As it creates a safe emotional environment to do so.

### **Advocating**

Tyson also recommends becoming an advocate for those who’ve experienced childhood neglect. She indicates that helping people heal from neglect can give survivors a sense of accomplishment and purpose.

Sharing your voice and personal advice can feel like a hug to your past self after years of being unheard.

### **Writing a letter to your past**

Writing a letter to you or your caregivers may be a powerful aid for emotional processing.

“[Try] writing a letter to the people that neglected you, expressing your true feelings, and then burning it,” says Tyson.

“Writing a letter to your younger self and acknowledging the neglect can be extremely powerful in the healing process.”

Allowing survivors to express their emotions safely, offering them a sense of closure.

Adding on, Tyson says that journaling may also be a powerful tool, especially with guided prompts may make it easier to bring structure to the chaos in the survivor's head.

## **Requesting guidance and support**

If and when emotional neglect interferes with your day-to-day life and relationships, seeking help from a mental health professional may help.

Support groups (both online and offline) provide you with a connection with ones who walked the same path you did, reducing the isolation many survivors feel.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the psychological effects of emotional neglect in childhood. Emotional neglect is a complex and many times overlooked form of maltreatment, having effects with the ability to extend into adulthood. By understanding the roots and consequences of emotional neglect and its difference from emotional abuse, we take a critical step towards early recognition, prevention, and support. Ultimately, raising awareness about emotional neglect isn't only a matter of psychological concern but a societal responsibility and by early identification of signs of emotional neglect, we can create an environment where a child does not need to earn or beg for the love or attention they inherently deserve. Every child should grow up knowing they are valued, not through grand gestures but through consistent presence of a caretaker, emotional availability and unconditional care. The path forward doesn't lie only in treatment but in prevention, awareness and understanding of emotional needs.

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