

Assessment Techniques for Emotional Abuse

- **The child-caregiver relationship**

Psychological maltreatment consists primarily of messages a child receives about him/herself and about important interpersonal relationships. The child-caregiver relationship should be observed. Because of the chronic nature of much psychological maltreatment, repeated observations may be necessary to obtain a representative sample of behavior and to provide grounds on which to recognize patterns of child-caregiver interaction. Observations of the interaction have limitations because parents may not behave in their usual manner when being observed.

The child-caregiver relationship can also be assessed through interviews of the caregiver and the child, review of pertinent records, observation, consultation with other professionals, and collateral reports from siblings, grandparents, school and daycare personnel, neighbors, and others.

- **Child characteristics**

Psychological evaluation procedures such as observations, interviews, questionnaires, and projective techniques, can provide clarifying and corroborative information about patterns of interaction, care, and treatment, and their impact on the child. Deviance or delay in the child's functioning are assessed through direct observation by the evaluator, testing, the observations of others, and available reports and records (e.g., school, health, therapy).

Assessment Techniques for Emotional Abuse (continued)

- **Caregiver/family competencies and risk factors**

Evaluation of caregiver competencies and risk factors assists in determining the existence of psychological maltreatment, in developing a prognosis for improvement in the child-caregiver relationship, and in identifying issues to address in treatment. Relevant areas of functioning include: (1) Caregiver's representational models or attitudes toward past attachment figures, current partner, and child(ren); (2) Personal resources (intelligence, job skills, social skills, personality variables, mental health); (3) Social support/resources (marital status, family, friends, financial status, community involvement); and (4) Life stresses or transitions in the family.

Assessment of the caregiver usually includes one or more interviews, review of collateral reports and records, and psychological testing.

- **Consideration of societal and cultural context**

A family's community context and immediate social and economic circumstances should be taken into consideration when evaluating caregiver behavior. The psychological conditions jeopardizing a child's development may not be under the control of a caregiver. Homelessness, poverty, or living in a violent neighborhood can have an adverse impact on quality of care and child development. Caregivers are not responsible for conditions over which they have no control.

Professionals should be knowledgeable about and sensitive to cultural and ethnic differences in care taking styles and customs. If the evaluator is not familiar with the cultural context of the child and family, consultation with appropriate experts is required.