

Clinical Indicators of Child Psychological Abuse As Defined by State Statutes

Children who are being psychologically maltreated (emotionally abused and neglected) exhibit one or more of the following characteristics to a severe degree: anxiety; depression; withdrawal; outward aggressive behavior; or a **substantial and observable change in behavior, emotional response or cognition that is not within the normal range for the child's age and stage of development.**

In severe child psychological abuse cases, children will exhibit the following three substantial and observable changes. (Childress, 2015)

- 1. A complete suppression of a child's normal, healthy attachment to one parent. Abruptly, a child begins to reject one parent for no reason. He or she will publically display disdain and/or contempt for the "targeted" parent. As this condition worsens the child will treat the targeted parent more and more harshly, with less and less remorse or empathy.**

Early in the family's history, the child felt attached and cared for by both parents. Even though the mentally ill parent could not connect emotionally with the children, the healthy attachment to the other parent allowed the children to develop normally. However, this never lasts. Partners/parents who have relationally abusive personality disorders thrive on escalating conflict. For reasons too complex to discuss here, these individuals lie, exaggerate problems and blame others to drive wedges between other members of their family. They do not communicate directly, but instead plant seeds of suspicion and contempt in the minds of one family member against another. The happy home quickly disintegrates and separation and divorce ensue.

Once the abusive parent has the children alone, the child psychological abuse reaches a pathological level. He or she begins to apply subtle but constant pressure to make the child question their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward the other parent. Under relentless coercion and manipulation the child starts to think that the targeted parent is a danger or threat to their survival (this is called trauma). In order to cope with the extreme demand from the abusive parent to choose between parents, children suppress their positive feelings for the targeted parent.

Forcing a child to "choose" to love and care for only one of their two parents is simply evil. The child must suppress their love, respect, attraction, emotional needs, positive thoughts and good memories of their healthy parent, who makes up half of their identity. When the child internalizes these negative feelings it affects their perception of themselves and their relationships with others in the world around them. This disrupts their emotional, cognitive, and personality development. Suppression of attachment to a healthy, loving parent is so far outside the normal range at any stage of development that it is contrary to our primary motivation for survival. It is impossible to understand the severity of torture these children must feel that drives them to have to take such drastic measures to cope with the demands of one parent.

Example: About 6 months after my divorce was final and the children were spending 50 percent of their time in each home, my 10 year old son came back from placement with his father, crying. He said to me, "I'm so confused mom, dad says that you lie all the time."

*Rather than get angry at his father, my heart went out to him. We sat down and I asked him to tell me when he could remember a time that I had ever lied to him. I watched his contorted, tear stained face start to relax when **he** realized that what his father was saying wasn't true. He smiled and hugged me, relieved to know that I was still the same mom that he always had.*

At the time, I thought that I would be able to combat his father's campaign against me by keeping open communication with my son. However, the next time he came back from his father's his negative emotions toward me were so chaotic and caustic that he was no longer able to think critically and I couldn't reconnect with him. He was angry, belligerent, hyper aroused, frustrated and confused. He withdrew. It was 9 years later, after his first year in college when my son felt safe enough to let his attachment to me resurface.

2. Children imitate the abusive parent's patterns of narcissistic/borderline personality traits, such as superiority and entitlement.

This drastic change in a child's behaviors, emotional responses and cognition, is completely abnormal for any age or state of development.

Thankfully, the child does not have a personality disorder or the disorder traits themselves, but a child learns what he or she lives and they begin to imitate the abusive parent's language, behaviors, and attitudes. Psychologically abusive parents treat the child as if they are above the targeted parent in the family hierarchy. They are encouraged to think that they have the right to judge and punish the targeted parent. They use language that is not within the norm for any age or stage of development. In particular, children start to use dramatic and attention getting words such as "abusive" and "forced" when describing the relationship with the targeted parent. The psychologically abusive parent also creates an insecure attachment with their children. The children believe that they will lose both parents, if they do not adopt the hateful and denigrating attitudes and feelings that the abusive parent has for the targeted parent.

Example: I told my son that his dog missed him when he was gone. He immediately turned hostile and said that he didn't have a dog, or a sister, or a mother. Then he began telling me how I had failed the family. He said "You should have stayed in the marriage and just taken what dad dished out. It wasn't that bad, it's not like he abused you, he never hit you!" Then he started blaming me for his father's affairs and also blamed me for the fact that his father's girlfriend had broken off his most recent relationship. My son vowed that if I "forced" him to follow placement he would make me cry everyday, because he would never stop hating me. He ended the confrontation by snarling, "I wish you would die so I could spit on your grave."

3. Children share the abusive parent's delusion that the targeted parent is all bad and dangerous. They begin to fear the targeted parent and resist contact.

Fear of a targeted parent is indicative of a 180-degree shift in a child's behaviors and emotional response to their healthy and loving parent. This is completely abnormal for any age or stage of development.

Children are ambivalent towards their parents. They like and dislike somethings sometimes about one or the other. They even favor a parent at times. However, even when children temporarily favor one parent over the other, that doesn't cause them to fear, hate and/or reject the targeted parent.

Example: My son called the police on me the night that I confronted him about his drug use. He reported that he was afraid that I was going to hurt him. When the police arrived, they saw my son cowering in a corner. Scotty (named used with permission) was well known in our town. At the time, he played on a National Champion Rugby team and held the weightlifting record at the high school.

The police looked at him and then at me, his 5 ft., nothing, 50 year old mother and raised his eyebrows. All he said was "Scotty, we're not buying this." Almost immediately, Scotty returned to normal and we had a pretty decent time until he went back to his father's.