

# THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BATTERED CHILD

By J. Garbarino et al (1986; 1992)

Garbarino et al reported that the psychological maltreatment of children is more likely to occur in families where the atmosphere is one of stress, tension and aggression – a good description of what happens in a high conflict divorce. They identified psychological maltreatment as a pattern of adult behavior that is psychologically destructive to the child and sabotages the child's normal development of self and social confidence.

They identified five types of psychological maltreatment:

- i) *Rejecting* – The child's legitimate need for a relationship with both parents is rejected. The child has reason to fear rejection and abandonment by the alienating parent if positive feelings are expressed about the targeted parent and the people and activities associated with that parent including the extended family.
- ii) *Terrorizing* – The child is bullied or verbally assaulted into being terrified of the target parent. The child is psychologically brutalized into fearing contact with the target parent and retribution by the alienating parent for any positive feelings the child might have for the targeted parent. Psychological abuse of this type may be accompanied by physical abuse.
- iii) *Ignoring* – The parent is emotionally unavailable to the child, leading to feelings of neglect and abandonment. Divorcing parents may selectively withhold love and attention from the child, a subtler form of rejecting that shapes the child's behavior.

- iv) *Isolating* – The alienating parent isolates the child from normal opportunities for social relationships. In Parental Alienation situations, the child is prevented from participating in normal social interactions with the target parent and relatives and friends on that side of the family. In severe situations, social isolation of the child sometimes extends beyond the target parent to any social contacts which might foster autonomy and independence.
  
- v) *Corrupting* – The child is missocialized and reinforced by the alienating parent for lying, manipulation, aggression toward others, or behavior which is self-destructive. In Parental Alienation situations with false allegations of abuse, the child is also corrupted by repeated involvement in decisions of deviant sexuality regarding the target parent or other family and friends associated with that parent. In some cases of severe Parental Alienation, the alienating parent trains the child to be an agent of aggression against the target parent, with the child actively participating in deceptions and manipulations for the purpose of harassing and persecuting the target parent. This is particularly likely to occur in what Turkat (1994; 1995) called “Divorce Related Malicious Parent Syndrome”.

Psychological maltreatment can be mild, moderate or severe. The effects on the child may vary according to the child’s age, temperament and ability to access social support. The more dependent the child is on the alienating parent, the more likely they are to exhibit a wide variety of significant psychological and social problems.