Beware Emotional Maltreatment
Principals set the bar for identifying and responding to this overlooked form of abuse.

By Margaret A. King
and Gregory R. Janson

**BY LAW, TEACHERS** and other school personnel must report child abuse, maltreatment, and neglect in all states in the U.S., and are trained to look for signs of abuse. Most teacher-initiated reports are made in connection with parents who mistreat or abuse their children. It is only in rare cases that teachers or other school personnel are reported; this usually occurs when the abuse is extreme and reported in the media.

We are concerned with emotional maltreatment, a less visible form of abuse that frequently occurs in schools, but is often ignored or dismissed as an acceptable form of discipline or sanctioned classroom-management practice. The impact of emotional maltreatment on children is significant and impacts personality development, relationships, and learning. Principals, as the chief operating officers of schools, have a responsibility to acknowledge that emotional maltreatment exists, identify and understand the tendency, and respond to it.

**Acknowledge, Recognize, Understand**

Emotional maltreatment exists in educational settings when the discipline strategies used by educators intentionally or unintentionally shame, humiliate, or threaten the emotional well-being of children. Because children seek approval from teachers, negative relationships with teachers can impact their academic performance. For example, children who suffer from emotional maltreatment from teachers demonstrate higher levels of school-refusal symptoms and have frequent headaches and stomachaches. These children might also develop a negative sense of self and their abilities.

Acknowledging the existence of emotional maltreatment is the first challenge for most principals because it is often difficult for them to believe that education professionals who are entrusted with
that embarrassment will encourage the student to be better prepared. Instead, the child often becomes the scapegoat, the one who never knows the answer.

Children are repeatedly diminished, belittled, or ridiculed when teachers make statements to the class such as: “Tell James what I said” or “Can anyone help James figure out what is going on?” For James, this everyday occurrence becomes a form of daily torture that he cannot escape. Children respond to spurning in different ways. One child might become the class clown, while another might become increasingly anxious and resist going to school.

1 Spurning is the act of belittling, shaming, ridiculing, singling out, or humiliating children verbally or nonverbally, and it is the most common form of emotional maltreatment that occurs in the classroom. An eye roll or disapproving frown can hurt as much as a sharp word. Some teachers might call out a child who comes to class unprepared or frequently does not pay attention. That child can quickly become the person who the teacher repeatedly calls on to answer a question. The teacher might hope

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to sit still and pay attention, she will be moved back to kindergarten. As a result, Ann feels desperate and hopeless because the teacher continuously expects Ann to perform beyond her developmental level or abilities.

6 Terrorizing children by using fear and intimidation as a classroom management strategy creates an unsafe classroom environment. If a teacher is yelling or screaming, throwing pencils or other objects, or engaging in other behaviors that threaten children’s sense of safety, the classroom can feel unsafe to every child in the room. This type of behavior impacts the victim, the child who is the object of the screaming and yelling, as well as the bystander, the child who is witnessing the behavior.

7 Exploiting or corrupting can happen when teachers model emotional maltreatment as an acceptable way to treat others. Children often take their cues from teachers and a child who witnesses or experiences emotional maltreatment might begin to model the teacher’s behavior, spurning, isolating, or ignoring and rejecting peers who do not follow the rules. They might come to see these “noncompliant” children as a threat to their own well-being and status in the classroom. Isolated, spurned children in the classroom easily slide into scapegoat status and are subsequently victimized by students who are behaving appropriately based on the teacher’s definition of acceptable behavior.

Take Action
Action by an informed principal is the most effective way to ensure that classrooms are free of emotional maltreatment. Action involves raising awareness, providing information and training, and providing supportive supervision.

Raising awareness is a powerful first step that makes emotional maltreatment visible. Help school staff understand the destructive effects of emotional maltreatment on children.

One of the most effective preventative measures you can take is to help staff realize that what is accepted or sanctioned classroom practice, intended to force children’s compliance, might in fact be emotional maltreatment.

Educate by introducing the topic at a staff meeting and work with staff to establish a schoolwide policy related to emotional maltreatment that is integrated into the school’s culture. Support teachers and other school personnel with information, printed materials, and in-service speakers on emotional maltreatment.

Respond to emotional maltreatment when it occurs; be prepared to intervene on behalf of a child; talk with teachers or staff involved and offer alternative approaches; and help teachers develop strategies to intervene when they witness emotional maltreatment in the school. Also, make sure that parents have a way to express concern if they think their child is in a classroom where emotional maltreatment occurs. Children might be unable to accurately describe what is happening in school or how they feel about it; therefore, parents should look for changes in behavior as well as comments they make about their experiences in school.

As the principal, you have the ability to reduce the risk of emotional maltreatment and create a nurturing environment for the students in your school.

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