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EMOTIONAL CHILD ABUSE AND RESILIENCY: AN AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Emotional child abuse is recognised as the unifying construct of child abuse (Brassard & Gelardo, 1987). Defining emotional child abuse (ECA) is an area of debate in the literature and a widely recognised definition has yet to be developed. There is general agreement on the definition of resilience with most making reference to adapting and coping well in the face of adversity. Recent research has questioned the implied unidimensionality of the term. A research study was designed with several aims: to explore how ECA is defined by professionals working in the area of child abuse, and by members of the general public; to develop an understanding of the nature of ECA from adults who self-identified as having experienced ECA; and, to examine the ways in which these adults coped, and dealt with ECA and its effects. Further aims of the research following from these were to develop a definition of ECA, and to identify implications for practice for those working in the area of ECA. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989) was the theoretical base for the research.

The literature on resilience was reviewed with a particular focus on ECA. Consistent findings in the literature on the cost of resiliency in the area of emotional well-being and functioning were explored and used to critically examine the clinical utility of the term.

Two surveys were developed, one for distribution to all the professionals working in the area of child abuse in statutory agencies in Auckland; and one for distribution to a sample of adults living in the greater Auckland area. Comparison of the conceptual and specific categories derived from the definitions of ECA provided by the professional group (N= 181) and the lay group (N=142) indicated considerable agreement. Differences between the groups on the relative frequency of use of the categories were explained and directions for future research were suggested. Concurrence between the findings of this study and

others on developing a definition of ECA supported the existence of ECA as a separate and consistent form of child maltreatment.

Adults who saw themselves as having experienced ECA were identified through the general public and professional surveys (N=30). They were individually interviewed using a semi-structured format about the nature of the ECA they had experienced and how they had coped with it as a child, adolescent, and adult. The interviews, and relevant material from the surveys, were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach. The themes that emerged from the material on the nature of ECA were grouped into four areas: the nature of ECA; the effects of ECA; the context of ECA; and, disclosure of ECA. The themes that emerged on how participants coped and dealt with the ECA they had experienced revealed a range of coping strategies and changes in these across the broad developmental stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. An important distinction that emerged was that between coping with the ECA and dealing with it. The cost of coping was a prominent theme and concurred with findings in the literature.

The implications for practice and directions for future research generated by these findings are discussed. A theoretical definition developed from the research findings is presented and applied to specific examples from the research.

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Sticks and stones may break my bones but
names will (n)ever hurt me.

-Unknown

"Hope" is the thing with feathers-
That perches in the soul-
And sings the tune without the words-
And never stops--at all-

-Emily Dickinson (1861)

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