

EMOTIONAL INCEST

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Emotional Incest: An Overview

Emotional incest is an insidious and damaging form of psychological abuse that occurs within family systems. It is characterized by an inappropriate degree of emotional intensity and involvement between a parent and child, often in lieu of appropriate boundaries. This type of relationship dynamic can lead to a wide range of negative long-term psychological and interpersonal effects, with the child's development and sense of self being particularly affected. This article reviews the current research on emotional incest in order to better understand its definition, prevalence, effects, and treatment.

Definition

Emotional incest is an umbrella term for the inappropriate, enmeshed relationship between a parent and child. Research has shown that emotional incest is often born out of an unmet need on the part of the parent (Ogawa & Blanchard, 2007). This need can take many forms, from a lack of emotional support within the family system to an unfulfilled desire for a parent-child bond that is more intimate than is typically appropriate. Emotional incest is not an officially recognized psychiatric disorder, as the DSM-5 does not contain a definition for it. However, the concept has been discussed in the literature since the 1990s (Meyers, 1993).

Prevalence

The exact prevalence of emotional incest is difficult to determine, as it is often difficult to recognize and identify (Bagarozzi, 2007). However, research suggests that it is not uncommon in families, particularly those in which there is a history of childhood abuse or neglect (Weber & Weber, 2008). It is also thought to be particularly prevalent in families where there is a lack of appropriate boundaries between parents and children (Friedrich et al., 2012).

Effects

The effects of emotional incest are wide-ranging and can be both short- and long-term. In the short-term, the child may experience a range of negative emotions, such as guilt, shame, and confusion (Herman, 2005). In the long-term, the child may struggle with interpersonal relationships, and may even develop maladaptive coping strategies such as substance abuse or self-harm (Ogawa & Blanchard, 2007). Furthermore, the child may experience difficulty in forming a secure sense of self and may struggle with self-esteem issues (Weber & Weber, 2008).

Treatment

Treatment for emotional incest typically involves psychotherapy for both the parent and child. The focus of treatment is on helping the parent and child to learn appropriate boundaries and to develop healthier relationship dynamics (Friedrich et al., 2012). For the parent, this may involve

helping them to identify and address their own unmet needs, as well as teaching them to be aware of their child's needs and to provide appropriate emotional support. For the child, treatment may involve helping them to develop a sense of self-worth and to learn healthier coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, emotional incest is an insidious and damaging form of psychological abuse that occurs within family systems. It is characterized by an inappropriate degree of emotional intensity and involvement between a parent and child, often in lieu of appropriate boundaries. The effects of emotional incest are wide-ranging and can be both short- and long-term. Treatment typically involves psychotherapy for both the parent and child, and involves helping them to learn appropriate boundaries and to develop healthier relationship dynamics.

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