Defining Child Abuse and Neglect

“Abuse” and “neglect” are terms that are often used interchangeably. However, they represent two different types of maltreatment – abuse happens when someone acts against the child (e.g. physical abuse), whereas neglect happens when someone fails to act for the child (e.g. leaving a child at home unattended).

While defining emotional abuse and neglect may be complex and imprecise, most professionals agree that the occasional negative attitude or actions of parents may not yield harmful or permanent effects on a child. Both emotional abuse and emotional neglect follow a persistent and chronic pattern.

Reasons for emotional neglect

There are many reasons why emotional neglect could enter the picture. They include:

- **Busy parents** - Working parents often do not have time for their children (e.g. talking to them or playing with them). Some parents may feel overwhelmed with work or stress, to the extent that they start to reject their child emotionally. Some parents may isolate themselves from their child or are unable to interact with them. It is important to find a balance between work and family life to avoid neglecting your child.

- **Structure of the family** – If you are a single parent, you may find it a struggle to be there for your child emotionally, while juggling your demands at work. Elsewhere, parents with large families (say you have seven kids) may find it difficult to connect emotionally with every one of their children.

- **Mental health issues** – Mental health issues may affect the way a parent cares for a child or respond to their child’s needs. They may be unable to interact with their child, thus neglecting their emotional needs. Some parents may lead disorganised lives that could result in a chaotic household. This could affect their children emotionally in the long run.

- **Parents’ own history** – A parent who was emotionally neglected as a child tends to lack empathy and is more likely to emotionally neglect their own children. They may not respond to their children or are unable to establish a meaningful relationship with them. Being deprived of love and a sense of attachment in childhood can make them incapable or unwilling to provide adequate attention and affection to their children.

- **Inappropriate expectations of their children** – Some parents expect their children to behave in a certain way or meet certain standards (whether in behaviour or in school). When their children do not live up to these “standards”, they pull away from them emotionally.

Emotional neglect can have a significant impact on your child’s mental and behavioural development. It is imperative that you recognise the symptoms of emotional neglect, in ensuring that your child grows into a happy and wholesome individual.