The Depiction of EmotionalAbuse in Percy Jackson

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Introduction

Literature has been one of the most impactful pieces of history, allowing for the advancement of medicine, philosophy, and history. But, in addition to its more practical uses, it has also been a significant source of enjoyment. According to the World Population Review, the United States alone reads 275,232 books per year, showing just how prominent reading is in our society (Average Books Read per Year by Country 2024). For many children, reading is encouraged by parents and teachers, leading to a significant amount of reading for these ages. Because of this, there is already a large amount of research geared towards the impacts of reading in children and adolescents, all of which have demonstrated the connections between emotional understanding and reading (specifically fiction) at an early age. For instance, a study done by a researcher at the University of Amsterdam illustrated the correlation between reading fiction and emotional transportation, leading to increased empathy (Bal, P. Matthijs, and Martijn Veltkamp). Emotional transportation is the act of putting yourself in a story, more commonly known as putting yourself in someone else's shoes. However, while there are significant amounts of research regarding the correlation between research and emotional intelligence, there is no research regarding specific topics that may be leading to this increased empathy. Many studies, similar to that by Bal and Veltkamp, discuss the increased empathy as a result of the reading opposed to the themes and details that lead to transportation and result in empathy. Because reading is such a popular and important piece of life, many children are consistently reading and analyzing books, whether for school or for enjoyment. The PEW research center reports that 67% of 9-year-olds and 40% of 13-year-olds read for pleasure at least once a week (Schaffer). Because of this, it is important to research all different aspects of reading and the effects it may have. Inspecting how these books can impact emotional intelligence in children has helped

authors elevate their writing and other adults like teachers and parents make better book recommendations in order to best monitor the media their children are absorbing, as well as hopefully use books that prepare them best. The profound impact that reading has on emotional understanding makes it evident that reading regarding complex topics such as sexuality and mental health would foster greater empathy and understanding regarding these topics, making them important to talk about in books. Among common occurrences that aren't always talked about is abuse, particularly childhood emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is defined by the American Psychological Association as "a pattern of behavior in which one person deliberately and repeatedly subjects another to nonphysical acts that are detrimental to behavioral and affective functioning and overall mental well-being," ("APA Dictionary of Psychology"). The American Psychological Association reports that just over 900,000 children in the United States are affected by child maltreatment, and this number is claimed to be a gross underestimate ("Startling Statistics on Child Maltreatment."). This statistic only accounts for extreme instances of emotional abuse, not including less severe instances of abuse. Child abuse of any kind often festers and results in health problems later in life, whether mental such as PTSD or physical such as heart failure. The Mass General Brigham: McLean Hospital reports that among other signs of child abuse, one of the most prominent is changes in behavior, shifting towards depression or anger in addition to fearful responses and paranoia (The Mental Health Impact of Child Abuse). Furthering the discussion on emotional abuse, an article by J.D. of Stanford Law School, J. Robert Shull, clearly illustrates the historical understanding and implications of emotional abuse. In recent decades, past attitudes of indifference or even acceptance of physical abuse has begun to deteriorate, leading to strong advocacy against any form of abuse. However, despite the supposed repulsion of abuse, emotional abuse is commonly overlooked or shrugged off.

Psychological abuse and emotional abuse are very similar, with the most notable difference being the lasting effects being deeper as a result of psychological abuse. Both of these forms have been historically overlooked and normalized, often attributed to other situations or justified. They have both become a greater focus in recent years, but still get overshadowed by other forms of abuse that are often viewed as more severe. Part of what makes these so difficult to address is the difficulty in recognizing the indicators. Because it is psychological harm that comes from this, people often believe that these behaviors are simply normal for that person, or don't bother to address the root. Shull's primary argument is that these forms of abuse can be as damaging, if not more than, any other kind of abuse due to the lasting effects. Because of this, he advocates for stronger policies and educational practices so people are able to better recognize the signs of emotional abuse and confront it safely. Shull's work clearly illustrates the need for more education regarding emotional abuse. The lack of discussion and recognition surrounding emotional abuse has led to a lack of understanding, allowing more victims to go unseen and the continuity of many of these behaviors. In addition to Shull's assertions, an article by W.C. Nesbit and L.D. Karagianis furthers the research of emotional abuse through the impact of the abuse in the home and school. As children develop, two of the most important places for growth are home and school. Because of this, any emotional or physical harm sustained in these places can cause serious consequences for a young person. Psychological abuse, often characterized as purposeful behaviors that inflict emotional or developmental harm, is a harder form of abuse to recognize. Despite this, it can cause a significant amount of damage. In both of these environments, emotional abuse often presents itself through behaviors like ridicule, criticism, and control through manipulation or fear. These actions can manifest in psychological obstacles such as depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal for the victim. The author's primary focus is on

identifying the severity of this issue, though it often goes unrecognized. This abuse has lasting and profound impacts that can present for the rest of a child's life. Many of the signs of emotional abuse are swept over, often attributed to other factors or simply go unseen. The authors argue that the primary reasons for this are a combination of norms, lack of training, and the subtle nature of the indicators that we aren't used to looking for. These two sources clearly show the extent to which emotional abuse can impact the life of a child. The development of psychological disorders, such as depression and anxiety, can have severe effects in every aspect of life. These can ultimately lead to poor relationships with family, friends, and yourself that will create more difficulty in life. In addition to the social impacts, it also harms scholarly aspects of life, easily leading to decreased grades and ultimate difficulty later in life. In simply introducing and condemning emotional abuse in these books, authors are laying the groundwork for readers ro develop understanding on the issue and being able to better recognize these situations. Finally, an article by Chris Crowe examines the interaction between young adult literature and society, looking at the different perspectives on it and impacts of it. Crowe focuses on the deep meaning that young adult literature can have on teenagers, creating connections to them and helping them develop different outlooks on life. In addition, he addresses public criticism of this genre as some may view it as more childish, despite the often heavy content and relatable topics. The main focus of this article was the benefits that it can create in young readers. These books often contain topics and stories that are relevant and relatable to readers, often helping them understand themselves and the worlds around them better. This article demonstrates that while criticized by some, YA literature has a significant impact and can be used to further the understanding of complex topics and emotional development in kids. This, in addition to the clear need for emotional abuse awareness as shown by the other articles, makes it evident that

YA literature would serve as an effective medium of information. As I conducted my research, it became evident that there was a significant amount of research around the importance of conversations and themes in various books, specifically children's books. As reading aids in the development of critical thinking skills, empathy development, and understanding, there has been countless research surrounding the importance of discussing heavy or complex topics in these books to further produce understanding on these subjects. These studies often touch on the discussion of topics relatable to readers, things like war that may have been experienced by readers and is an important topic for readers to develop empathy and understanding around due to their real world application. However, many of the more touching and relevant topics have been left unstudied by academics. As these three studies touched on the impacts of emotional abuse on children, as well as the continued relevance of YA novels, it is clear that something that would continue the relatability of these novels is the discussion of such an unfortunately common occurrence. While it is collectively agreed upon by many sources that emotional abuse/maltreatment is likely a topic in many of these books as so many can relate to it, no studies have been done to explicitly reveal the extent in which many of the indicators have been presented in novels. This led me to my research question, how is emotional abuse depicted in the Percy Jackson series? My hypothesis is that emotional abuse in the Percy Jackson series will be portrayed with the greatest emphasis on ignoring, and my null hypothesis is that emotional abuse is not present in the Percy Jackson series.

Methodology

For my methodology, I will be doing a typical literary analysis through coding, and quantifying the parts of my data. Having a qualitative analysis aligns best with the humanities lens as it provides a more in-depth look at the research and explains why this may occur and

illustrates a gap that may be explored in further research. In my preliminary research, I found that the Child Crime Prevention and Safety Center reports 6 recognized types of emotional abuse: rejecting, ignoring, threatening, isolating, corrupting, and exploiting ("Kids and Emotional / Psychological Abuse.").

Figure 1.

- **Rejecting** – Communicating to a child through words and conduct that he or she is unwanted and/or worthless.

- **Ignoring** – Withholding affection or showing little or no interest in a child.

- **Threatening** – Using threats, cursing and yelling at children.

- **Isolating** – Prohibiting a child from engaging in appropriate activities with friends or keeping a child away from human contact.

- **Corrupting** – Exposing a child to drugs, alcohol, criminal behavior or inappropriate sexual conduct.

- **Exploiting** – Manipulating a child into a forced activity or responsibility without regard for the child's development.

*The color circle next to the indicator represents the color of highlighter and tab I will be using to annotate for the given indicator

These indicators are legally recognized, meaning they could be realistically used in a court of law. While there are countless ways that emotional abuse can occur, I chose these six as they were clearly defined, and the ability of them to be used in a trial makes them more effective to understand than other potential indicators of abuse. As I read the given books, I will code for these key indicators of emotional abuse to determine whether or not a character has been subjected to childhood abuse. I will then quantify this data in graphs, and compare how

frequently these indicators are mentioned in the books, as well as the distribution of these indicators across all 10 books. Since some YA books stand out more than others, I used the Barnes & Noble website to determine the most popular series in each subgenre of fiction. While many of the series stood out and have been undoubtedly impactful books, Percy Jackson is the most relevant series for the current time period. The Percy Jackson saga is made up of two book series, known as *The Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series and *The Heroes of Olympus* series. The two Percy Jackson series were published between June of 2005 and October of 2014. In addition to these two series, Rick Riordan has continued to release Percy Jackson books with the most recent being published in September of 2024 and the next anticipated book release in September of 2025. These publication dates alone show that Percy Jackson is the ideal series to study given the recent publication dates. Other popular series, like Harry Potter, had its most recently published book in 2007, showing that Percy Jackson is far more relevant at present. Not only have these books continued to be published for just under two decades, but they have remained popular with the most recent book sitting at the #1 kids fantasy bestseller spot since its release (Barnes & Noble). Aside from the books, a Disney+ television adaptation was released in December of 2023, with its second season having just wrapped up filming and season three being green-lit as of March 14, 2025 (Rick Riordan). This clearly goes to show not only the relevance of this series now, but in the future as Riordan continues to release books and the television adaptation continues to release seasons. Using these 10 books, I will code for the indicators listed above, as well as track the perpetrating character and the victim. Through this data, I will be able to determine how evenly the indicators are discussed in the books, as well as the character demographics that it tends to affect more to ultimately determine how well it may relate to readers. My method complies with ethical research practices because while my research contains

a potentially triggering topic, there is no human participation involved. This eliminates potential

for individuals to be involved in the research and possibly sustain psychological harm or distress

from the topic of the study. Additionally, the research is not instigating any of these situations,

analysis is done through the coding of the fictional books. Because the research isn't examining a

real situation and doesn't involve human participants, it eliminates ethical concerns. The data

generated will be a numerical display of how often different indicators of emotional abuse are

presented (expressed through graphs and tables) in addition to a thorough analysis of where in

the book these indicators are presented, the attitude towards the behavior, and where the behavior

was produced from. I will analyze my data through using the numerical data to determine which

indicators are presented more than others. Additionally, this will allow me to analyze the data to

determine how these instances may lead to increased understanding of the subject and critical

thinking.

Figure 2.

Analysis of the importance of the quote. This section will be my explanation as to why this specific quote may impact a reader's view or attitude towards a specific kind of abuse, later leading to developed empathy and understanding towards it

Aa Quote	☰ indicator	⊙ book	☰ analysis	# page
"Whenever I was home, he expected me to provide his gambling funds."	exploiting	PJO 1 - The Lightning Thief	Continuing his dislike for Gabe, Percy further describes his relationship with his stepfather, specifically the lack thereof. Percy and Gabe's relationship is fully abusive, with Gabe mistreating Percy and even relying on him for money despite Percy's age and lack of a job. Just as stated above, Percy outwardly expressed his dislike for game and condemns his actions, making it clear to the reader that behavior like this is not only unacceptable, but also not normal.	31

By tracking the specific type of abuse demonstrated in my table opposed to just my annotations, I will be able to determine a variety of things like
- Is this type more discussed in the book than others
- Is this type experienced by a character more than others
- Does this type have a specific attitude or message that is always associated with it?

Page number, decimal represents a quote that is more than one page (e.g.: quote that is pages 30-31 becomes 30.31 on the table)

*Shows my Notion data tracker

Figure 3.

Highlighted indicators (yellow for threatening, purple for exploiting)

Tab for indicators (yellow for threatening, purple for exploiting)

These methods of tracking, while time consuming, allowed me to best understand my data. As shown by figures 2 and 3, I would highlight and tab the given indicator using the color that correlates, then recording the specific data in my chart to ensure my data stayed organized. By using clearly defined indicators that can be found in anything, my methods can be easily replicated through analysis of the different indicators and tracking of them in any book, movie, or television show to illustrate if emotional abuse is present in these different forms of media. Through all of these features I was able to determine the frequency and distribution of the indicators better allowing me to analyze my data.

Data Collection

For this study, data collection and analysis lasted around 3 months, from January to March. Using my book annotations and table, I was able to effectively track and analyze my data in graphs.

Graph 1.

Amount of Indicators

- PJO 1 - The Lighting Thief
- PJO 2 - The Sea of Monsters
- PJO 3 - The Titan's Curse
- PJO 4 - The Battle of the Labyrinth
- PJO 5 - The Last Olympian
- HOO 1 - The Lost Hero
- HOO 2 - The Son of Neptune
- HOO 3 - The Mark of Athena
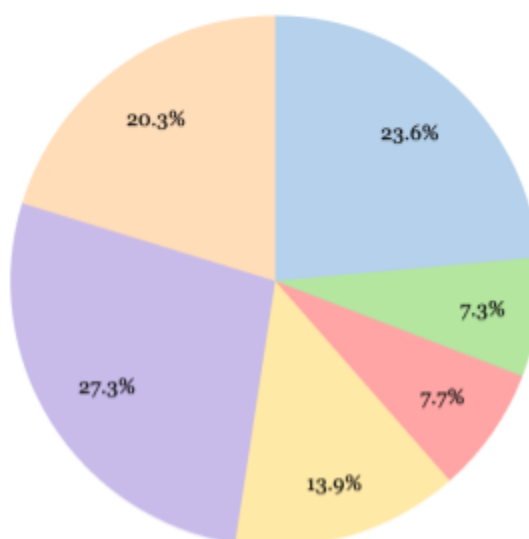- HOO 4 - The House of Hades
- HOO 5 -The Blood of Olympus

60
58
46
46
47
65
33
26
31
42
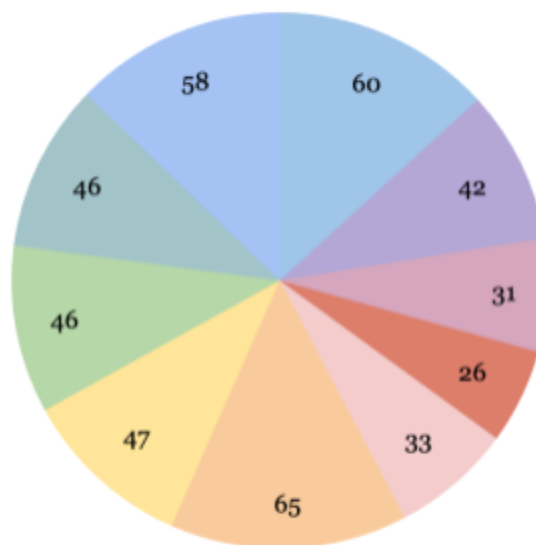
*Shows the amount of indicators in each book

Graph 2.

Indicators In PJO and HOO

- Rejecting
- Ignoring
- Isolating
- Threatening
- Exploiting
- Corrupting

23.6%
7.3%
7.7%
13.9%
27.3%
20.3%

*Shows the frequency of each indicator through all 10 books

Graph 3.

Indicators in Percy Jackson (10 Books)
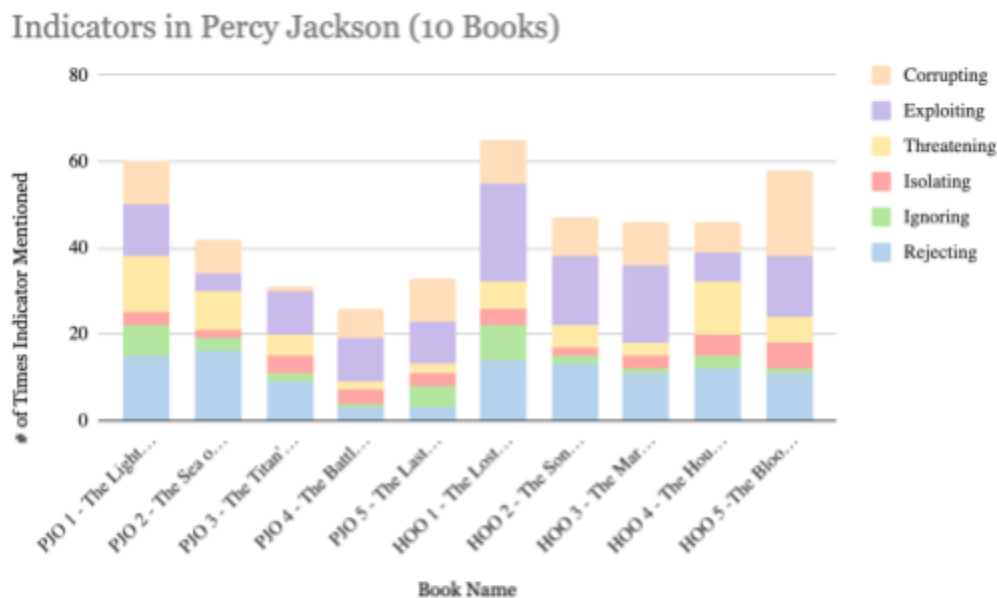
*Shows the amount of each indicator in each book

These graphs are representative of the data I collected from all 10 books, looking at the amount of indicators in the books. As you can see from graph 1, there were significant differences in the amount of indicators per book. Some books had as little as 26 indicators, while others had as many as 65. While there were mostly no trends surrounding the amount of indicators per book, the only trend that can be observed is that the first book in each series (*Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lighting Thief* and *The Heroes of Olympus: The Lost Hero*) had more indicators than the rest of the books as they provide background on the characters and how they were treated as children. This demonstrates the difference in how frequent emotional abuse is between the books with some books having much more emphasis on this topic than others. In addition to having significant differences in the number of indicators per book, there's also a significant difference in the amount each type of indicator is mentioned across all 10 books. Graph 2 clearly

shows how some indicators like exploiting, made up over 27% of the mentions of abuse, whereas indicators like ignoring and isolating, each made up only around 7% of these mentions of abuse. This data undoubtedly shows that the mentions of abuse were not evenly distributed between indicators. Finally, graph 3 illustrates the data from both previous graphs, illustrating the number of times each indicator type is mentioned in each individual book. Overall my study shows that emotional abuse is mentioned around 454 times in the Percy Jackson series, clearly showing the prevalence of this topic throughout Riordan's books. These mentions of abuse average at 45.4 mentions per book, and an average for one indicator for every 10 pages.

Analysis

As clearly shown through my data, my null hypothesis was disproved as the books contain a significant amount of emotional abuse. However my hypothesis was also disproved. As my research indicated, ignoring was actually the least prominent indicator, directly contradicting my hypothesis. I initially created this hypothesis using my knowledge of the Percy Jackson and Heroes of Olympus books. Since I had read Percy Jackson in the past, I recalled many mentions of ignoring. As the children in this book are the children of a god and a human, they all live in single-parent homes with their human parents. They have limited or no contact with their godly parent. As these children had no contact with their godly parent, I believed ignoring would be the most prominent indicator, hence my hypothesis. Rather than ignoring, indicators like exploiting and rejecting were the most common. This may be due to some of the instances of abuse coming from not just parents, but also antagonists that use emotional abuse to demean or manipulate the characters. Furthermore, ignoring served as more of a theme in all 10 books, opposed to having more specific mentions that I could pinpoint to a specific quote. However, despite the rejection of my hypothesis, my research is extremely successful in determining the presence of abuse in

this series. The lack of trends in my data suggests that the emotional abuse in this series was not planned just to bring awareness, but it is also a significant part of the backstories of the characters, and therefore occurs naturally throughout the books. The frequency and commonality of emotional abuse in these books emphasizes this as a theme, and encourages further discussion around this topic.

Limitations

While I tried to mitigate any shortcomings through my research process, I still faced some limitations. As this project was contained to a single school year, it only allowed for 3 months of data collection. This left me with limited time to read and prevented me from including some of Riordan's new books that I would have otherwise included in my study. Balancing other schoolwork and social events with my reading sometimes made it difficult for me to stick to my reading schedule of around 1 book a week. Additionally, while I tried to eliminate as much bias as possible by sticking to the exact definitions while coding, I'm sure there are instances where I included or excluded some mentions of abuse. As I was the only researcher, it was sometimes difficult to discern if something was an indicator or not.

Conclusions/Implications

Having finalized my research it's crucial to understand the effect that discussing emotional abuse has on kids. By talking about a difficult topic like this, books usually actually foster a greater understanding of these topics in the reader. A quote from *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lighting Thief* reads "Whenever I was home, [my stepdad] expected me to provide his gambling funds. He called us our 'guy secret,' meaning if I told my mom, he would punch my lights out." (Riordan 31). While this quote is difficult to read, it illustrates the

understanding that can result from the discussion of difficult topics in children's books. Percy later goes on to discuss that his stepdad's behavior was disgusting, saying how frustrated he is at this situation. Percy's condemnation of his stepdad's behavior truly conveys to the reader that not only is this behavior not ok, but it also is not normal. As I discussed earlier in my paper, the fictional nature of kids' books leads to emotional transportation and therefore greater understanding, making the discussion of these topics in children's books that much more important. In the future, I would love to see research done on other prominent books for younger audiences. Countless books aimed at readers under 18 have been popularized, many of them even being adapted into movies or television shows. Books like Shadow and Bone, The Maze Runner, and The Hunger Games are all examples of book series that have been adapted into film or television within the last decade and have amassed a large fan base of young readers. Having studies done on these series will allow for more data to be collected on how emotional abuse is portrayed across not just Percy Jackson, but many popular children's series. Additionally my project can be expanded upon by doing a more in-depth analysis, as well as outward examinations like surveys that collect data regarding how the Percy Jackson books may have impacted readers' understanding of emotional abuse at a young age. My study is contributing to the conversation by finding how specific mentions of abuse can foster understanding in kids. Not only this, but by identifying the presence of emotional abuse in these books, it brings awareness to parents so that they can have difficult conversations about these topics with their kids and prepare them for the contents of the books. Not only that, but it makes writers more aware of how they're including these topics in their books. Many studies have shown that the discussion of these difficult topics in books can lead to increased emotional transportation and therefore greater understanding. This is an incredibly important part of including these topics in books.

However, part of what leads to greater understanding of the given topic is the way in which it is portrayed. Many other popular children's books have discussed the idea of emotional abuse, but some of them do not take the time to condone this behavior. In the Harry Potter books, Harry is subjected to both emotional and physical abuse at the hands of his aunt and uncle, whom he lives with. Despite the severe maltreatment he is subjected to, Harry is repeatedly sent to live with them over the summer, and the mistreatment he is subjected to is not discussed or condemned by any characters in these novels (Rowling, J.K.). While emotional abuse is mentioned in these books, the lack of condemnation and discussion around the topic refrains the book from leading to emotional transportation and understanding. Because of this, studies like this are incredibly important because not only do they identify the presence of abuse in children's literature, but they are able to determine the effectiveness of these mentions. By doing this, it allows future writers to portray emotional abuse in a way that is guaranteed to lead to emotional transportation, and therefore aid young readers in their understanding. While some people might be concerned about the presence of these difficult topics in children's books, it is crucial to building understanding. The conversations in children's books is something that is often censored due to the belief that it protects young readers. Despite this belief, all studies support the idea that including difficult topics in these books actually helps children rather than harming them. A study done by researchers at Zhejiang University in China conducted a study on sexual assault prevention methods in children's picture books. These researchers concluded that when human characters in these picture books refused inappropriate touch, children in the study were better able to recognize a situation with potential abuse and show self-protection skills (Huang, Sangruo, and Chen Cui). While there are some key differences between this study and mine, such as the type of book, it clearly illustrates that some topics that would have otherwise been

avoided in children's books can actually significantly contribute to the understanding of readers. By having main characters convey to young readers that some touch is inappropriate, these children were able to better understand when they were put in these situations and they were better able to refuse these advances. Similar to this, discussing abuse in children's books would help younger audiences identify when themselves or friends are put in a situation like this, and it helps them navigate it in a way that is safe for them.

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