

## Shouting at children can be as damaging as physical or sexual abuse, study says

Level 3: Advanced

### 1 Warmer

a. Read the saying. Then, discuss the questions.

“Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me.” (1862)

1. Have you heard this saying before? What do you think it means?
2. Do you agree with the saying? Why (not)?
3. Is there a similar saying in your mother language you know? If so, how is it similar or different?

### 2 Key words

a. Write the correct words from the wordpool to match the definitions below. Then, find and highlight them in the article to read them in context.

abuse	belittle	characterised	distress	impact
insult	intimidate	offspring	perpetration	persistent
prevention	psychotic	self-esteem	self-harm	verbal

1. the child of a person or couple \_\_\_\_\_
2. the act of deliberately harming yourself to cope with stress, anxiety, or sadness  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. treating someone in a cruel, violent, or unfair way \_\_\_\_\_
4. the act of committing a crime or doing something wrong or evil \_\_\_\_\_
5. using spoken words \_\_\_\_\_
6. be typical or usual of a person, place, or thing \_\_\_\_\_
7. make somebody feel or seem unimportant \_\_\_\_\_
8. have or make a powerful effect on someone or something \_\_\_\_\_
9. something said or done to hurt or offend someone \_\_\_\_\_
10. determined to do something despite difficulties \_\_\_\_\_
11. a very worried, upset, or unhappy feeling \_\_\_\_\_
12. frighten or threaten someone so they will do what you want \_\_\_\_\_

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13. a feeling of being happy with yourself and your abilities \_\_\_\_\_
14. affected or caused by a severe mental illness, in which somebody sees or hears things that are not there, or believes things that are not true \_\_\_\_\_
15. the act of stopping something bad from happening \_\_\_\_\_

**b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.**

1. Early \_\_\_\_\_ and education are essential to manage certain health issues.
2. Social media can have a negative effect on teens' \_\_\_\_\_ and make them feel less confident.
3. It's important to stand up against people who \_\_\_\_\_ and bully others.
4. His grandmother's behaviour was always \_\_\_\_\_ by kindness and empathy.
5. They had a \_\_\_\_\_ agreement, but they never put it in writing.
6. When someone is in \_\_\_\_\_, they may call emergency services for help.
7. Child \_\_\_\_\_ is a serious issue which should be reported to the authorities.
8. He thought his jokes were funny, but everyone else thought they sounded like \_\_\_\_\_.
9. Mental health issues can have long-lasting \_\_\_\_\_, especially without professional help.
10. Parents care for their \_\_\_\_\_ to help them grow up safely and healthily.

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#### **Research finds verbal abuse leaves young people at greater risk of self-harm, drug use and going to prison**

**Denis Campbell**

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- 1 Parents who shout at their children or call them “stupid” are leaving their offspring at greater risk of self-harm, drug use and ending up in jail, new research claims.
- 2 Talking harshly to children should be recognised as a form of abuse because of the huge damage it does, experts say.
- 3 The authors of a new study say “adult-to-child perpetration of verbal abuse is characterised by shouting, yelling, belittling the child and verbal threats”.
- 4 “These types of adult actions can be as damaging to a child’s development as other currently recognised and established subtypes of mistreatment such as childhood physical and sexual abuse,” the academics say.
- 5 More children experience childhood verbal abuse than physical or sexual abuse, and the number who encounter it appears to be as high as 40 per cent and growing, it is claimed.
- 6 Prof Shanta R Dube, a US expert in child abuse and a co-author of the study, said: “Often adults are unaware of how their shouting tone and criticising words, such as ‘stupid’ and ‘lazy’, can negatively impact children, particularly if that is how they experienced being parented.”
- 7 The study examined existing evidence on the impact of childhood verbal abuse. One recent paper, a UK study led by Prof Mark Bellis, involved a representative sample of 20,556 UK residents and found that those who had been verbally abused were almost twice as likely (19.9 per cent) as those who had not (10.8 per cent) to use cannabis and at almost double the risk of ending up in jail (4.4 per cent) than those who had not (2.4 per cent).
- 8 One recent UK survey of 1,000 11- to 17-year-olds found 41 per cent said that adults – mainly parents, carers, teachers and friends’ parents – frequently used hurtful and upsetting words to blame, insult or criticise them. Half (51 per cent) said they experienced such behaviour weekly and one in 10 said they came across it daily.
- 9 Asked what the most hurtful and upsetting words they experienced were, children cited “you’re useless”, “you’re stupid” and “you can’t do anything right”. In contrast, the most positive things they heard adults say were “I am proud of you”, “you can do it”, and “I believe in you.”
- 10 Concern among experts in children’s development and mental health about the extent of adults’ verbal abuse has also led to the creation of a new charity, Words Matter. It aims to raise awareness and end the problem.
- 11 The charity, which is thought to be the first organisation in the world to campaign solely on the issue, is being supported by many different charities focused on children and families health.
- 12 Prof Peter Fonagy, a co-author of the paper, the head of the division of Psychology and Language Sciences at University College London (UCL) and the Chief Executive of the Anna Freud Centre, said: “Children are genetically prepared to trust what adults say. They take us grown-ups seriously. If we betray that trust by using words to abuse rather than teach, this can leave children not just ashamed, isolated and excluded but also unable to engage with their community and draw the full benefit of social learning.”
- 13 He added: “We know from literally hundreds of studies that exposure to verbal abuse profoundly affects children and is associated with persistent psychological distress, complex emotional and relational difficulties, physical as well as mental disorders, increased likelihood of recreating abusive situations in their lives, for example finding a partner who is abusive to them, as well as finding themselves repeating the abuse with others.

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- 14 “Using words to intimidate, shame and control may appear less obviously harmful than bodily threat, but the same risks accompany this misuse of language: low self-esteem, increased nicotine, alcohol and substance use, increased risk of anxiety, depression and even psychotic disorders.”
- 15 The paper by Dube, Fonagy and other academics at UCL cites World Health Organization research that found 36.1 per cent of children worldwide had experienced emotional abuse, which includes verbal abuse. That was many more than the 25 per cent who had suffered sexual abuse and the 22 per cent who had been subjected to physical abuse.
- 16 A recent study of young people in the US by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 55 per cent of older school students had been cursed at or experienced other verbal insults in the family home.
- 17 Dube said that childhood verbal abuse “is not on the radar for detection” and is also hard to prevent because so few adults are aware that it is a common and harmful problem.
- 18 Parents in particular need to be made aware that how they talk to their children can have a lifelong impact, understand why they do so and start speaking more positively, she added.

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### 3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. According to the research, what are children at a greater risk of when parents shout at or use hurtful words with them?
2. Why do the authors of the study suggest that talking harshly to children should be recognised as a form of abuse?
3. How is adult-to-child perpetration of verbal abuse characterised in the study?
4. According to the research, how damaging is verbal abuse compared to other types?
5. What percentage of children are reported to experience childhood verbal abuse?
6. What did the UK study led by Prof Mark Bellis find regarding the impact of childhood verbal abuse on individuals?
7. How frequently do children in a recent UK survey report experiencing hurtful and upsetting words from adults?
8. What were some of the most hurtful and upsetting words cited by children, and what were some of the most positive things they heard from adults?
9. According to Prof Fonagy, the same risks are present for physical and verbal abuse. What are they?
10. According to Prof Dube, why is verbal abuse so hard to prevent?

### 4 Key language

a. Read these sentences adapted from the article. Complete them with comparisons using **as ... as** and an appropriate adjective.

1. Shouting at children can be \_\_\_\_\_ physical and sexual abuse.
2. These types of adult actions can be \_\_\_\_\_ as other currently recognised and established subtypes of mistreatment.
3. The number of children who encounter verbal abuse appears to be \_\_\_\_\_ 40 per cent and is growing.
4. UK residents who had been verbally abused were almost twice \_\_\_\_\_ to consume cannabis than those who hadn't been verbally abused.

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**b. Combine these sentences using comparisons with as ... as.**

1. Children's mental health is important. Children's physical safety is equally important.
2. Physical abuse can be traumatic to children. Verbal abuse can be traumatic, too.
3. Hearing adults say, "I am proud of you" was positive for children. Hearing "you can do it" was also positive.

**c. What other structures or phrases can be used to compare things?**

### 5 Discussion

**a. Discuss these statements.**

- "Adults don't believe that childhood verbal abuse is severe."
- "Hurt people hurt people."
- "Speaking positively to children can boost their self-esteem."

### 6 In your own words

**a. Do some research about positive communication techniques, such as active listening.**

- *What are some of the things you can say?*
- *What kind of body language is beneficial?*
- *How can you tell there's a positive impact?*
- *How can you address negative behaviour?*

**b. Report your findings to the class and share your opinion. Here are some phrases to help you when you describe the technique.**

*According to the experts, ...*

*One example is ...*

*The steps in the technique are ...*

*A way to do/show this is ...*

*Another idea is ...*

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Here are some phrases to use when stating your opinion.

*I think (that) ...*

*I want to understand why ...*

*From my perspective, ...*

*In my understanding/opinion, ...*

*I (dis)agree with ...*