

Sticks and Stones and Hurtful Words



We all remember the childhood chant “sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me.” We had it wrong. Hurtful words can cause significant emotional harm.

Names will forever hurt especially when *parents* do the name-calling.

Verbal or emotional abuse conveys that the child is worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered or only of value in meeting someone else’s needs. It includes:

- Belittling, name-calling, degrading, shaming, ridiculing or humiliating a child
- Making a child feel unsafe by slamming a door, bashing an object, or threatening severe punishment
- Setting unrealistic expectations with threat of loss of affection or physical harm if not met
- Ignoring a child, being emotionally cold and unsupportive, withdrawing comfort as a means of discipline
- Rejecting, avoiding or pushing a child away
- Describing the child negatively
- Openly admitting dislike or hating the child

Children who were verbally abused grow up to be self-critical adults who are more likely to experience depression and anxiety (Sachs-Ericsson). They had almost twice as many symptoms as those who had not been verbally abused. They were also twice as likely to have suffered a mood or anxiety disorder. Sachs-Ericsson studied more than 5,600 people ages 15 to 54 and, surprisingly; nearly 30 percent reported they were sometimes or often verbally abused by a parent.

Emotional abuse of a child occurs for many of the same reasons that physical abuse occurs. When parents are stressed, they may lash out verbally and physically at their children. Some parents who verbally abuse their children may have learned this parenting style from their own parents. They may be unaware of positive ways to motivate or discipline their children.

Verbal abuse can have long-term effects on children. Over time, children begin to believe the negative things they hear about themselves. They use those negative statements and thoughts as explanations for anything that goes wrong. A child may use negative self-talk and believe “I’m stupid” or “I’m lazy” or “I’m no good.” When the message is repeatedly conveyed by a parent, the pattern of self-criticism and negative thinking follows the child into adulthood. Self-criticism makes a person more prone to depression and anxiety.

Most research on child abuse has focused on physical or sexual abuse. Little attention has been paid to the destructive nature of parental verbal abuse including swearing at, belittling, or calling children unkind names. Children who were verbally abused are more physically aggressive, more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors, and have problems with personal relationships.

Research by Martin Teicher at the Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, shows that verbal abuse during childhood may have an impact on mental health that is even greater than other forms of abuse. Parental verbal abuse affects a child's developing brain and is also a powerful negative model for interpersonal communication that impacts a child's future relationships.

Yvonne Vissing and Murray Straus define verbal aggression as "communication intended to cause psychological pain" including name calling, nasty remarks, stony silence, and sulking. In a 1991 nationwide study, they found that nearly two-thirds of children were victims of verbal aggression by parents. Verbal aggression by parents took place an average of 12.6 times per year, or more than once a month. While the average was about once a month, some parents almost never spoke harmfully to their children, while others did so frequently. More boys were victims of verbal abuse than girls.

Parental verbal aggression leads to physical aggression by the child (Vissing and Straus). The more frequent the verbal abuse, the more likely a child will be engaged in physical aggression or delinquent behavior. Even children who are never hit or spanked by their parents exhibit behavior problems associated with verbal abuse.

Parents should not underestimate the consequences of verbal and emotional

abuse. Protect children from the negative effects of emotional abuse by:

- Learning more about emotional abuse.
- Developing positive parenting skills where discipline corrects a child's behavior rather than punishes or humiliates.
- Identifying ways to effectively manage your stress.
- Creating a support system.
- Being a good role model. Cultivate positive relationships and treat others with respect. Praise your partner and your kids publicly and in private.
- Apologizing if you lose your temper and say something in anger that wasn't meant to be said. Children benefit from knowing adults can admit when they make mistakes.
- Walking away when you feel you are losing control. Take a time out, ask another adult for help, take a few deep breaths and count to ten before saying *anything*. When unkind words leave your lips they can't be erased and won't be ignored.

Physical abuse might leave physical scars but verbal abuse leaves invisible scars that may never heal. The impact of verbal abuse on vulnerable, developing children lasts a lifetime. Sticks and stones will break our bones but unkind words from a parent are even more destructive and enduring.

Sources:

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- Teicher, M.H., Samson, J.A., Polcari A., & McGreenery C.E. (2006). Sticks, stones and hurtful words Relative effects of various forms of childhood maltreatment. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 163, 993-1000.
- Vissing, Y.M., & Straus, M.A., (1991). Verbal aggression by parents and psychosocial problems of children *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 15, 223-239.

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