

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

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

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

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

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 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 ashamed childhood criticising development excluded
isolated mental health psychology threats trust verbal

1. treating someone in a cruel, violent, or unfair way _____
2. telling someone that you will punish or harm them, especially if they do not do what you want _____
3. the growth of something so it becomes bigger, stronger, etc. _____
4. the part of someone's life when they are a child _____
5. using spoken words _____
6. saying that you think somebody/something is bad or say what you think is wrong about it _____
7. the condition and health of someone's mind _____
8. the scientific study of the mind and how it affects behaviour _____
9. believing that somebody/something is good and honest and will not try to harm you _____
10. feeling guilty or embarrassed about something you have done _____

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11. being far away while having little contact with others _____
12. deliberately not included in something people are doing or considering

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity.

1. They had a _____ agreement, but they never put it in writing.
2. Child _____ is a serious issue which should be reported to the authorities.
3. During his _____, his family visited their relatives in Peru every summer.
4. Little children automatically _____ their parents.
5. It is essential to care for your _____ as much as you care for your physical health.
6. She wants to study _____ because she is interested in why people react to things differently.
7. If you live in a small village, in the winter you may feel very _____.
8. They spent so much time _____ each other that they never talked about the good things.

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01 October, 2023

- 1 Parents who shout at their children or call them “stupid” are leaving them at greater risk of hurting themselves, drug use and ending up in jail, new research claims.
- 2 Shouting at children should be recognised as a form of abuse because of the huge damage it does, experts say.
- 3 Shouting, yelling, and using threats can be “as damaging to a child’s development as other, more recognized, types of mistreatment such as childhood physical and sexual abuse,” the academics say.
- 4 More children experience childhood verbal abuse than physical or sexual abuse, and about 40 per cent encounter it and that percentage is growing, it is claimed.
- 5 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 and criticising words, such as ‘stupid’ and ‘lazy’, can negatively affect children, particularly if that is how they experienced being parented.”
- 6 The study examined evidence of childhood verbal abuse. One recent paper involved 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).
- 7 One recent UK survey of 1,000 11- to 17-year-olds found that 41 per cent said that adults frequently used hurtful and upsetting words. Half (51 per cent) said this happened weekly and one in 10 said it happened daily.
- 8 Asked what the most hurtful words were, children cited “you’re useless”, “you’re stupid” and “you can’t do anything right”. The most positive things they heard adults say were, “I am proud of you”, “you can do it” and “I believe in you.”
- 9 Concern among experts in children’s development and mental health about adults’ verbal abuse has also led to a new charity, Words Matter. It aims to raise awareness and end the problem.
- 10 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.”
- 11 He added: “Exposure to verbal abuse profoundly affects children and is associated with psychological pain, complex emotional and relational difficulties, physical as well as mental disorders. They are also more likely to have 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.”
- 12 World Health Organization research found that 36.1 per cent of children worldwide had experienced emotional abuse, including verbal abuse. That was many more than the 25 per cent who had suffered sexual abuse and the 22 per cent who had suffered physical abuse.
- 13 A recent study in the US by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 55 per cent of older school students had experienced verbal abuse in the family home.
- 14 Dube said that childhood verbal abuse is hard to prevent because few adults are aware that it is a common and harmful problem.
- 15 Parents need to understand that how they talk to their children matters, why they do so and start speaking more positively, she added.

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First published in *The Guardian*, 01/10/2023

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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 them?
2. Why do the experts say that shouting at children should be recognised as a form of abuse?
3. What three types of verbal abuse can be damaging to a child's development?
4. According to the research, how damaging is verbal abuse compared to other types?
5. What percentage of children experience childhood verbal abuse?
6. What did Prof Dube say about adults' awareness?
7. How frequently do children in a recent UK survey report experiencing hurtful words from adults?
8. What were some of the most hurtful words cited by children, and what were some of the most positive things they heard from adults?
9. What is the aim of the charity Words Matter?
10. According to Prof Dube, why is verbal abuse so hard to prevent?

4 Key language

a. Complete the sentences. Change the verbs to adjectives ending in *-ed* or *-ing*.

1. The _____ (trust) child held her grandmother's hand the whole time.
2. This is a support group for _____ (abuse) children.
3. While she was in the hospital, she was often alone and felt _____ (isolate).
4. She wanted feedback but received _____ (criticise) remarks instead.
5. The way you were _____ (parent) shows in how you raise your children.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "Adults don't understand childhood verbal abuse."
- "Speaking positively to children helps their mental health."

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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 helpful?*
- *How can you tell there's a positive effect?*
- *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 are ...

A way to do/show this is ...

Another idea is ...

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 ...