

Verbal Abuse of Children

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CONSUMER HEALTH INTERACTIVE

You've no doubt heard the adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Well, it's not true. Name-calling hurts -- especially when the person doing it is a parent, a teacher, or a coach. Hollering and flashing your temper might strike you as a natural and effective form of discipline if you were brought up with it. But for children it may cause emotional trauma that results in long-lasting harm. Among other things, verbal abuse can undermine your child's self-esteem, damage his ability to trust and form relationships, and chip away at his academic and social skills. In fact, current research shows that verbal abuse of children can be just as destructive emotionally as physical and sexual abuse and puts them in as much risk for depression and anxiety.

What is verbal abuse?

You may be verbally abusing your child if you are doing any of the following:

- **Name-calling, belittling, swearing, insulting.** ("You are stupid." "You're a rotten kid.") Indirect criticism, such as disparaging your child to your spouse, also hurts. Just because you're not berating your child directly doesn't mean he doesn't hear it and feel the sting.
- **Rejecting or threatening with abandonment.** ("I wish you'd never been born." "I should put you up for adoption.") This kind of verbal abuse creates a sense that your child doesn't belong -- and isn't wanted -- in the family.
- **Threatening bodily harm.** Studies have linked verbal aggression and physical aggression: A Harvard study found, for example, that "parents who yell frequently are the ones most likely to hit frequently, and vice versa." Even if you don't act on violent threats, they may make your child fear you and distrust you.
- **Scapegoating or blaming.** ("You're the reason this family is such a mess." "If I didn't have to take care of you, I could have a better life." "If you weren't so clumsy, your sister wouldn't have gotten hurt.") Your child will think he's a bad person who deserves to be unhappy.
- **Using sarcasm.** Making a mocking remark, such as "Now that was smart" when he spills grape juice on the rug, might seem like a way to avoid direct criticism, but your child is perceptive enough to understand that you're demeaning him.
- **Berating your spouse.** A study at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, determined that children who see their parents verbally abusing each other are more likely to be depressed or anxious, and to experience more interpersonal problems of their own. Interestingly, the study also found that verbal aggression between parents was more traumatic to children than physical violence between parents.

How common is verbal abuse?

Reports are mixed. A study at the University of New Hampshire found that 63 percent of more than 3,000 American parents surveyed reported one or more cases of verbal aggression toward children in their homes. However, a Child Protective Services study determined that only 6 percent of all child abuse cases involved "emotional maltreatment" (of which verbal abuse is the most common form). The fact that signs of verbal abuse are harder to recognize and prove than signs of physical abuse may account for the seemingly low number of "official" verbal abuse cases.

What are signs that a child is suffering from verbal abuse?

- **Negative self-image.** This is the most common and pervasive effect of verbal abuse. Your child may say things like, "I'm stupid," or, "Nobody likes me." Or he may simply seem withdrawn, sullen, or depressed, all of which can be signs of a poor self-image. In defining emotional abuse, the National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse says that it "attacks a child's... sense of self-worth."
- **Self-destructive acts.** "Cutting" (using razor blades or knives to cut his own skin) and all forms of self-injury signal a problem, as do other reckless activities that put your child in danger.
- **Antisocial behavior.** The New Hampshire study found that verbally abused children demonstrated higher rates of physical aggression, delinquency, and interpersonal problems. Your child may hit other children, frequently quarrel with his classmates, or be cruel to (or even torture) animals.
- **Delayed development.** The slowdown may appear in your child's physical, social, academic, or emotional development. He may have difficulty making friends, fall behind in school, or engage in regressive acts such as rocking, bed-wetting, and thumb-sucking.

Does verbal abuse do any long-term harm?

Yes. Research shows that abused children are more likely to:

- become victims of abuse later in life
- become abusive themselves
- become depressed and self-destructive later in life
- develop anxiety

Why can't I seem to control my temper?

Most parents at some time find themselves feeling frustrated and angry with their children. This is normal. Occasionally they say things they regret -- to their children, their spouses, or their friends. This, too, is normal. But if you find that you are routinely having angry outbursts or that whenever you're frustrated you lash out at those around you in the ways described above -- then you need to get help. (Please keep in mind that if you feel overwhelmed by your anger, you may want to consider getting help from a counselor, psychotherapist, or mental health professional trained in anger management.) Meanwhile, here are some ways to begin helping yourself.

To start getting a handle on your outbursts, try to understand the reasons behind your behavior. The following are some of the more common explanations for verbally abusive behavior:

- a failure to understand that there are other ways to discipline and communicate with your child
- the belief that verbal abuse is necessary as a form of "tough love"
- an inability to control strong emotions
- a history of verbal abuse by parents, teachers, and other adults

What can I do to avoid verbally abusing my child?

In moments of stress and anger, try to refrain from saying anything mean or sarcastic to your child. Remember, you're his main and most important role model. If you tend to fall apart, lose your cool, and act abusively at challenging times, you'll likely raise a child who does the same.

Here are some ways you can calm yourself down:

- Take a "time-out." This method works as well for adults as it does for kids. If your child can be left alone, go to another room. If he's too young for that, try walking to the other end of the room. Then take a few slow, deep breaths, seeking to let go of the situation emotionally. Wait five minutes (or more if you need it) before talking to your child.
- Share your feelings of resentment or anger with your spouse or a friend. Be sure to do this in private, where your child won't hear you and feel wounded by your words.
- Try to deal only with the present rather than letting all the stressful incidents that have "piled up" overcome your emotions.

In addition, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends using what it calls the RETHINK method to bring your feelings under control. RETHINK stands for:

- **R**ecognize your feelings.
- **E**mpathize with your child.
- **T**hink of the situation differently. (Try using humor.)
- **H**ear what your child is saying.
- **I**ntegrate your love with your angry thoughts.
- **N**otice your body's reactions to feeling anger and to calming down.
- **K**eep your attention on the present problem.

A study at Colorado State University found that parents who participated in a six-week workshop based on this method became more effective at managing their anger.

What can I do to prevent someone else from verbally abusing my child or another child?

Always be aware of other influences on your child. Just because you have your temper under control doesn't mean that all the other adults in your child's life do. Teachers, coaches, babysitters, siblings, older siblings of friends, and even other children's parents can harm your child by demeaning or humiliating him. Make a point of asking your child about his relationships with other adults. Of course, he might not tell you if someone is verbally abusing him -- he might not even realize it. So you'll want to be on the lookout for signs of emotional turmoil: Nightmares, bed-wetting, school phobia, and other signs of excessive anxiety may be part of the "code" you'll have to crack in order to figure out what's troubling your child.

If you feel that another adult is abusing your child or his or her own child, you can call the Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hot Line at (800) 422-4453, for advice. If you're certain of the problem, contact your local Child Protective Services (CPS) agency to report it. CPS professionals will evaluate the report, and if they deem it necessary, they will send someone out to talk with the alleged abuser. CPS will keep your report confidential, although you can make an anonymous report if you prefer. (But keep in mind that bogus anonymous reports are, unfortunately, quite common.)

Sometimes a family counselor or psychologist can assess your child for signs of verbal abuse. If you think the abuse is occurring at school, be sure to take your child to be evaluated by someone independent of the school. Oftentimes your family doctor or pediatrician can help you with a referral. Do whatever is necessary to get your child away from the abuser -- if a PE coach is taunting him, for example, ask that he be placed in a different class. And be sure to make your concerns known to the principal, director, league officials, and so on.

What if I see a stranger verbally abusing a child in the supermarket or at the park?

Confronting a total stranger about parenting techniques is a very touchy endeavor. There are many different ways of parenting, and an approach that seems abusive to you may not be seen in the same light by others. Be aware, too, that confronting a parent in an accusatory manner is liable to make her defensive and possibly more angry than she already is. However, if you feel strongly that the parent is harming her child, and you need to say something, it's best to take a subtle, even empathetic approach rather than delivering a challenge. Many child advocates believe that in a public setting distracting the "abuser" will at least partly defuse the immediate situation for the child in danger. Don't try to teach the parent, coach, or

teacher how they "should" behave. Saying something like, "It's hard to know what to do, isn't it?" might be a good way to get the parent to step back and rethink her behavior, or at least calm down. Remember, you just want to shift the focus off the child. Although some people may feel that distracting the adult from taking her anger out on the child seems to condone such behavior, it's only an attempt to ease the turbulence of the moment. After all, a long-term solution is just not possible when you're dealing with a complete stranger in the middle of a grocery store.

-- Benj Vardigan is a senior editor for Consumer Health Interactive and the winner of an Outstanding Young Journalist award from the Northern California chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists.

Further Resources

National Child Abuse Hot Line (800) 422-4453

National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect <http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu/>

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