

Children

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

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

Denis Campbell *Health policy editor*

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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.

Talking harshly to children should be recognised as a form of abuse because of the huge damage it does, experts say.

The authors of [a new study](#) into such behaviour say “adult-to-child perpetration of verbal abuse ... is characterised by shouting, yelling, denigrating the child, and verbal threats”.

“These types of adult actions can be as damaging to a child’s development as other currently recognised and forensically established subtypes of mistreatment such as childhood physical and sexual abuse,” the academics say in their paper in the journal *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

More children experience childhood verbal abuse than physical or sexual abuse, and the number who encounter it appears to be as high as 40% and growing, it is claimed.

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.”

The study examined existing evidence on the impact of childhood verbal abuse. One recent paper, a UK study led by Prof Mark Bellis and published in *BMJ Open*, 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%) as those who had not (10.8%) to use cannabis and at almost double the risk of ending up in jail (4.4%) than those who had not (2.4%).

One recent UK survey of 1,000 11- to 17-year-olds found 41% said that adults – mainly parents, carers, teachers and friends’ parents – frequently used hurtful and upsetting words to blame, insult or criticise them. Half (51%) said they experienced such behaviour weekly and one in 10 said they came across it daily.

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”.

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.

The charity, which is thought to be the first organisation in the world to campaign solely on the issue, is being supported by the NSPCC, Save The [Children](#), Place2Be, which provides mental health care to under-18s, and the Anna Freud centre in London, the leading children and families mental health charity.

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 grownups 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."

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."

"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."

The paper by Dube, Fonagy and other academics at UCL cites [World Health Organization](#) research that found 36.1% of children worldwide had experienced emotional abuse, which includes verbal abuse. That was many more than the 25% who had suffered sexual abuse and the 22% who had been subjected to physical abuse.

A recent study of young people in the US by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 55% of older school students had been cursed at or experienced other verbal insults in the family home.

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.

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 to their offspring more positively, she added.