

Sticks and Stones: **Words can hurt**

by Kathleen Leon

Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

Children who have suffered from verbal abuse know that words can hurt and be as damaging as physical blows to the body. The scars from verbal assaults can last for years. These psychological scars can leave children unsure of themselves, unable to recognize their true value and their talents, and sometimes unable to adapt to life’s many challenges.

What is verbal abuse?

Verbal abuse is constant yelling, demeaning language: “You’re a rotten kid.” “Can’t you do anything right?” “You make me ashamed I’m your

teacher (father or mother).” “You dummy.”

Verbal abuse is a particular form of psychological and emotional abuse characterized by constant verbal harassment and denigration of a child. It’s a psychological battering. Many persons abused as children report feeling more permanently damaged by verbal abuse than by isolated or repeated experiences of physical abuse.

Except for name calling, verbal abuse can go unrecognized—especially when it comes from a loved one, an authority figure, or a person in a position of power, such as one’s parent, one’s teacher, a family provider, or even an older sibling that one has learned to look up to in childhood.



People who often indulge in verbal abuse may have little if any conscious awareness of what they're doing. Few teachers or parents have taken a course on interpersonal communications or learned effective communication by example in childhood.

Effect on children

Verbal abuse involves a pattern of attitudes or acts that are detrimental to the child's development of a sound and healthy personality.

Verbal abuse, either subtle or direct, is a misuse of power by the abuser. In abusive relationships, it's hard for children to understand what's going on. Their thinking gets confused.

Typically children think that somehow the abuse has something to do with them. They believe there's something about themselves that makes their loved one mad at them, distant or disdainful toward them, fed up with them, or doubtful of them. Many children grow up with this daily message that damages their spirit and crushes their ego.

If you have been verbally abused, you have been told that your perception of reality and your feelings are wrong. Your personal boundaries have been violated. When you look around and say "What was that all about?" you can bet you have just been verbally abused.

Take responsibility for your language

Each of us may be guilty of having snubbed or too harshly criticized a child. We can avoid hurting children in the future by taking responsibility for our language.

Characteristics of verbal abuse

- Verbal abuse is often done in secret or behind closed doors.
- Verbal abuse has many forms of expression.
- The abuser often denies the abuse.
- Verbal abuse tends to intensify over time. The child adapts to the abuse and often tends to take on the blame.
- Verbal abuse devalues and discounts the child's perception. As a result, children can doubt their own reality and invalidate their own experience.
- Physical abuse is always preceded by verbal abuse.

Evaluate these factors:

Level of sound

- Eliminate the extra emphatic stress on words and parts of words that signal hostility.
- Be careful not to speak so loudly that listening to you can be painful or frightening.
- Be careful to speak in a pitch and at a speed that is comfortable for those listening.

Word choice

- Eliminate openly hostile words such as curses, demeaning names, abusive labels, and insults.
- Avoid using words that are not familiar to listeners or offensive to them.
- Select words that match the sensory mode of those we're interacting with. "Listen to my words," or "Look at my face."
- If you must say something that will cause distress, choose words with great sensitivity and care.

Sentence choice

- Eliminate blaming and dismissive language. Work to communicate frustration calmly, with concrete examples and explanations.
- Don't use open insults or smart cracks, sarcastic remarks, or put-downs.
- Discourage use of verbal attack patterns in your own language and that of others.
- Refuse to utter sentences that can feed hostility loops.
- When tempted to give others commands and criticisms, look for another way to transmit the same information.
- Don't demoralize or cause the other person to lose face.

Balance between love and limits

Strive to be a healthy authority over the children in your care.

Effective teaching includes limits.

- Hold children accountable for their actions in the classroom. Be firm but fair.
- Let reality be the teacher. Allow failure, and help children learn from mistakes.
- Use actions, as well as words. Walk, don't just talk, your values.
- Relationships come before rules. Ask—and give—respect.

Respect children's needs. They need to

- be loved and accepted,
- be secure and relatively free of threat, and
- be loved no matter what.

Behavior has a purpose. When children misbehave, there is a reason—either deliberate or unintentional.

Children intentionally misbehave to

- gain attention,
- use power to control,
- avoid pressures and expectations by appearing to be inadequate, or
- seek revenge.

Unintentional misbehavior can have many causes including

- neurological or brain-based issues such as fetal alcohol syndrome, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD);
- nutritional issues such as an allergy or food sensitivity;
- inexperience: not knowing the behavior is undesirable; or
- experience: exhibiting behavior that the child thinks is normal.

Encourage positive behaviors. Help reinforce positive attention seeking with these strategies.

- Recognize and encourage achievements.
- Place a premium on cooperation.
- Create an environment that encourages creativity and experimentation.

Examples of verbal abuse

- name calling
- the game of one-upmanship—someone always saying or doing one better than you
- put-downs
- countering—someone saying “But you did...”
- manipulation
- criticism
- hard selling—someone trying to convince you that you’re wrong
- intimidation
- crazy-making—someone making you feel crazy, implying you’re the one with the problem
- hostile aggression
- having your feelings invalidated
- misuse of power
- undermining and discounting your perspective

- Let children know that failure is not fatal.
- Don’t reward or encourage competition between classmates.
- Expect the best in all situations. Shoot for excellence, not perfection.
- Lessen the conflict by speaking quietly but firmly.
- Don’t argue. Simply state what is needed and remove yourself from the scene.
- If a child is old enough, or receptive enough, sit down and talk reasonably, pointing out simply what you expect.
- With younger children who display power by refusing to obey, simply give them a choice. “You can wash your hands now with everyone else, or you can wait to be the last one.”

Communicate confidence and appreciation

Allow children to meet their own needs. As soon as a child shows the ability, you can say:

- Do you want to try using this spoon yourself?
- I’ll wait while you tie your shoes.
- Are you ready to make your own peanut butter sandwich?
- Here is the way to use the tape recorder.

Children respond to appreciation. They are born with curiosity and spontaneity. Every child has unique talents and interests. As teachers, our job is to give children the attention they need.

We can begin by noticing what a child likes—music, dancing, running, bright colors, quiet times, and sports, for example. We can introduce and foster a child’s interests, bringing forth the child’s own unique self.

Here are ways to express appreciation:

- Thank you.
- You worked hard to wipe the paint off the table.
- Tell me about the book. What did you like best?
- It looks as though you took extra time to make that.
- Do you need some extra time to finish that?
- I really appreciate your being quiet and waiting until I finish talking.

Instead of lashing out at a child, do one or more of the following:

- Take a deep breath—and another. Remember you are the adult.
- Close your eyes and imagine you’re hearing what the child is about to say.
- Press your lips together and count to 10—or better yet, to 20.

- Give the child a break time alone. Let the child and you think about yourselves and why you're angry.
- Phone a friend, or talk to another teacher.
- If someone can watch the children, go outside and take a walk.
- Splash cold water on your face.
- Hug a pillow.
- Turn on some music. Sing a song or dance.
- Pick up a pencil and write down as many helpful words as you can. Save the list.

Stop using words that hurt. Start using words that help.

We all remember the chant "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Children use it to protect themselves against being hurt when someone is calling them names. It doesn't work. Words can hurt—and they do. But just as words can hurt, words can also help!

Here are some expressions that can give children confidence and raise their self-esteem:

- I love you.
- That's great.
- Let's talk about you.
- I believe you can do it.
- Believe in yourself as I believe in you.
- Good job.

Feeling safe and loved is important to children. You can help them by letting them know you love and respect them.



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