

19 December 23

WHAT IS VERBAL ABUSE



Verbal abuse means using negative words and language that cause harm. It's often hidden behind closed doors, like other forms of abuse. It's time we brought it out into the open so that its impact on children can be understood and given the attention it needs.

Verbal abuse may take the form of blaming, insulting, belittling, intimidating, demeaning, disrespecting, scolding, frightening, ridiculing, criticising, name-calling or threatening a child.

It's not just about shouting and screaming. Verbal abuse can also be quiet, insidious and subtle. Tone, volume and facial expression all play a part.

It affects two in five children – that's two million children experiencing verbal abuse in the UK today, and the number is rising.

WORDS HAVE POWER

A form of emotional or psychological abuse, verbal abuse is commonly used to intimidate, undermine and maintain a level of control and power over a child.

While it can be unintentional and unthinking, and a result of stressful lives and situations, for a child it can

result in low self-esteem, feelings of shame and guilt, intense humiliation, denigration and extreme fear.

Verbal abuse often co-exists with other forms of abuse, but it can also occur alone.

IMPACT UNDERESTIMATED

Our research shows it affects two in five children (11-17 years old). That's over one million children in the UK experiencing verbal abuse from adults.

Childhood is a time when the brain and body are built. And early childhood and the teenage years are particularly sensitive times, when our relationships and experiences very actively shape the foundations

of our brain and our body. Kind, calm and loving words, and secure, warm interactions build strong foundations and are crucial for a child's progress. Without a strong foundation, children are more likely to experience difficulties later on.

Destructive language can make us feel worthless and hopeless. When a child hears words that can bruise their soul, it can have long-lasting consequences for their development and lead to mental and physical health problems in the future. Research shows that childhood verbal abuse can be as harmful as other forms of abuse. It can be constant, and without help the harm can lead to anxiety, depression, eating disorders, PTSD, substance abuse, self-harm and even suicidal behaviours. Over time, verbal abuse can act like a toxic

stress on a child, derailing their physical and emotional development and inflicting trauma for a lifetime.

In addition, people who have been verbally abused may seek relationships where they are again abused. They can also become abusers themselves, as this is how they have learned to communicate.

RESPECT A CHILD AND THEY RESPECT THEMSELVES

All children need compassion, connection, acceptance and love. They need consistency and positive, supportive words to develop trust and emotional security. When a child is constantly shamed, disgraced, told over and over again that they are stupid or no good, or

compared negatively to others, they can find it very difficult to overcome their resulting feelings of worthlessness, guilt, indignity and hopelessness. A child's belief in who they are is formed by the opinions of their parents, caregivers and adults in positions of power, such as teachers. When these adults treat them with respect, they learn to respect themselves.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

It's never too late to change. Listening to a child and apologising to them can be the first step to take from rupture to repair.

SOME FACTS AND FIGURES ABOUT VERBAL ABUSE

Two in five children (41%) experience harmful verbal abuse by adults around them.

For over half (51%) the verbal abuse is weekly, and for one in ten daily (10%).

Toxic language can leave children feeling sad (66%), low in confidence (65%), depressed (53%), humiliated (52%), doubting themselves (46%), anxious (46%), ashamed (45%), embarrassed (44%), isolated (32%) and frightened (23%).

Two in three parents (65%) have heard adults saying unkind words and phrases to children.

Half of all mental ill health starts in childhood, by the age of 14 years.

HOW TO TELL IF A CHILD IS BEING VERBALLY ABUSED

If a child is being verbally abused, they may:

appear anxious, lack confidence and self-assurance, and become withdrawn, have difficulty making or maintaining relationships, find it hard to control their emotions, use language and act in a way you wouldn't expect them to at that age, find it difficult to concentrate, have regular aches, pains and muscle tension.



