

# Calls for verbal abuse of children by adults to be formally recognized as form of child maltreatment

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A new systematic review by researchers at UCL and Wingate University

has highlighted the importance of identifying childhood verbal abuse by adults as a standalone subtype of child maltreatment, to ensure targeted prevention and address the lasting harm it can inflict.

Child maltreatment is currently classified into four subtypes: [physical abuse](#), sexual [abuse](#), [emotional abuse](#), and neglect. These classifications guide the creation of interventions and the monitoring of affected populations.

[The study](#), published in *Child Abuse & Neglect*, and commissioned by the charity Words Matter, examines a total of 149 quantitative and 17 qualitative studies to assess how child verbal abuse is currently defined and measured.

Researchers found that there needs to be a more consistent way of defining childhood verbal abuse, as it currently varies between parents and other authorities, with it being normalized in some cultures as a form of discipline.

The nature of childhood verbal abuse involves behaviors that can be detrimental to a child's well-being, such as belittling, shouting, and threatening language.

It was found that these actions could have a lasting impact throughout the child's life, creating underlying emotional and psychological repercussions, including increased risks of anger, depression, [substance abuse](#), self-harm and obesity.

However, the team noted that there was a noticeable void in acknowledging childhood verbal abuse by [adults](#) as a distinct maltreatment subtype and that doing so would be a starting point for its identification and prevention.

Co-author Professor Peter Fonagy (UCL Psychology & Language Sciences), said, "This [systematic review](#) is timely and of significant clinical value. Preventing the maltreatment of children is the most effective way we can reduce the prevalence of child mental health problems. A sharp focus on childhood verbal abuse by adults around them by the new charity Words Matter, and this review will help make significant change, and support and direct our efforts to identify and respond to this risk in an effective and timely manner."

Data from the World Health Organization (WHO) has found that emotional abuse is now the most prevalent form of [child maltreatment](#), ahead of physical or sexual abuse.

However, researchers found that the term "emotional abuse" was ambiguous and focused on the victim.

Whereas the term "childhood verbal abuse" zeroes in on the adult's actions and this onus could be a starting point for prevention, were it to be made a subtype in its own right.

There was also a range of varying terminology associated with "verbal abuse" across the studies, with terms such as "verbal aggression," "verbal hostility" and "verbal abuse" being used—highlighting the need for standardized terminology in this area.

The review found that the main perpetrators of childhood verbal abuse by adults were parents (76.5%), other adult caregivers in the home (2.4%), and teachers (12.71%). Other adults noted were coaches (0.6%) and police (0.6%).

Shouting and screaming were the most documented characteristics of verbal abuse. However, the research emphasizes that definitions of childhood verbal abuse should not only consider the words used but also

the intent, delivery, and the immediate impact on children.

More research would need to be carried out on specific age groups to further understand the effects of this behavior.

Lead author, Professor Shanta Dube (Wingate University, U.S.), said, "Childhood verbal abuse desperately needs to be acknowledged as an abuse subtype, because of the lifelong negative consequences.

"We've seen tremendous strides in increased awareness and interventions targeting physical and [sexual abuse](#) perpetrators leading to the reduction in these forms of maltreatment. If we focus on 'verbal abuse' by perpetrators rather than just 'emotional abuse' among victims, we may develop similar actions to prevent childhood verbal abuse and its consequences.

"Breaking the intergenerational cycles starts with the adults."

Jessica Bondy, Founder of Words Matter, a newly established charity with the mission of enhancing children's overall health and well-being by curtailing verbal abuse by adults in their lives, said, "It's paramount to grasp the true scale and impact of childhood verbal abuse. All adults get overloaded sometimes and say things unintentionally. We have to work collectively to devise ways to recognize these actions and end [childhood verbal abuse](#) by adults so children can flourish.

"Words have weight, they can uplift or destroy. Let's build children up, not knock them down."

**More information:** Shanta R. Dube et al, Childhood verbal abuse as a child maltreatment subtype: A systematic review of the current evidence, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106394](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106394)

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