

Shouting at children linked to depression—but defining verbal abuse is what will help prevent harmful parenting

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A recent [research paper](#) has found that verbal abuse of children, including shouting at them and calling them names, is linked to low mood, drug abuse and delinquency (antisocial behavior).

The authors of the new study argue that because [verbal abuse](#) is considered as a part of [emotional abuse](#) (a category which includes many different types of harmful behavior towards children, such as manipulating them, humiliating them and giving them the silent treatment) it is overlooked and a "hidden problem." They state that childhood verbal [abuse](#) should be recognized as its own category of child maltreatment.

While there are limitations to the research study, it's well designed and important, especially in helping to define this type of emotional abuse.

Understanding maltreatment

Children who [are maltreated](#)—who suffer abuse and neglect—are more likely to encounter issues such as [poor mental health](#) later in life. [One study](#) has suggested that a global reduction of maltreatment by 25% could prevent 80 million cases of anxiety and depression worldwide.

Governments have tried to reduce maltreatment by making certain types of harsh parenting practices illegal. For instance, smacking is banned in [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#). However, smacking is a fairly easily defined behavior. It's less easy to tackle the behavior that makes up emotional abuse.

But when we ask adults whether they experienced abuse or neglect while growing up, [more than a third](#) will say that they experienced emotional abuse. This makes it the most common type of abuse reported by adults.

The study authors argue that by defining the behavior from adults that counts as childhood verbal abuse, this behavior can be changed—for instance through parent training programs.

Defining the problem

The research study is a [systematic review](#)—a scholarly study which gathers together and summarizes the results of existing research findings on a particular subject.

Individual research studies can arrive at different conclusions. This can be confusing, especially when there are hundreds of studies in a field of research. A systematic review helps to make sense of all the available evidence and find patterns.

The authors included 149 quantitative and six qualitative studies on the topic, and found they used 21 different terms to define child verbal abuse. The most common behaviors included yelling and screaming. Threatening words, name calling and criticizing were other common behaviors. Hardly any studies included behaviors where adults did not raise their voice.

The authors also identified the most common standardized questionnaires used by researchers to measure verbal abuse. Standardized measures have the advantage of having been [tried and tested](#) as reliable measures—for instance, on whether people will respond in a similar way when given the same questionnaire twice within a couple of weeks.

One problem the researchers identified was that half of the studies they surveyed used a non-standardized questionnaire, where it wasn't clear how good the measure was.

As results from research studies can be affected by other factors such as [genetic risk](#) or [other types of abuse](#), it is important that multiple studies come to the same conclusion if scientists are to make recommendations.

In this research study, for the age group including children and younger teenagers, only four studies linked verbal abuse to delinquent behavior. Across all age groups, eight studies reported a link between verbal abuse and depression. It is therefore important that more research is carried out to back up these findings.

Another problem is that most studies were cross-sectional instead of longitudinal. Cross-sectional studies only assess people at one point in time. From these studies, we cannot really tell what came first—the verbal abuse or the [mental health problems](#). It could be that parents did not know how to deal with, for instance, delinquent behaviors, and used harsh parenting techniques as a result.

[My own research](#) together with Dr. Valerie Brandt examined the relationship between maltreatment of children and symptoms of inattention and hyperactivity. We found that it works in two directions. Maltreatment increased these symptoms, but these symptoms also made it more likely that the child would experience future [maltreatment](#).

Overall, though, this well-designed systematic review is an important step towards a unified definition of child verbal abuse. Understanding what the problem is will help prevent harmful parenting in the future.

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