

Resource Article

Verbal Abuse

Carey Sturgeon

Verbal abuse emotionally hurts children just as much as physical or sexual abuse does. Children often judge themselves by the words of others. Verbal abuse damages their sense of worth and may cause long-term emotional problems.

Some children who are verbally abused do not know that they are being mistreated. They may think that it is normal for family members to yell at, curse at, or insult each other. Sometimes abusers tell children that they deserve the abuse or are responsible for it. It is important to help these children understand that verbal abuse is never the victim's fault.

What Is Verbal Abuse?

Someone is verbally abusive if she does any of the following behaviours repeatedly:

- Calling the child a demeaning name with the intention of creating a negative self-image.
- Belittling, insulting, or shaming a child, such as telling him that he is bad or worthless or telling him that he is ugly or a mistake.
- Making negative comparisons to others, such as "He is so much smarter than you. He makes you look stupid."
- Yelling and swearing at a child.
- Threatening to leave or abandon a child.
- Threatening physical harm to a child.
- Blaming a child for personal problems or life circumstances, such as saying, "I would have a better life without you."
- Physically or verbally abusing other people in front of a child.

How Does Verbal Abuse Hurt Children?

Children who are victims of verbal abuse often have feelings of anger, fear, sadness, guilt, shame, self-blame, and worry. They may have difficulty coping with their feelings. They often have low self-esteem, do not like themselves, and think that they are worthless.

Verbally abused children have a hard time trusting people and making friends. They do not like or get along with others. They may bully others. They may not want to spend much time with other children their age.

These children may have problems with schoolwork. They may abuse drugs or alcohol. They may hurt themselves by hitting, pinching, scratching, or cutting themselves. They may attempt suicide.

Some of these effects of verbal abuse carry over into adulthood. Also, those who were verbally abused as children often become victims of verbal abuse in their adult relationships.

Why Do People Verbally Abuse Others?

Understanding why some people verbally abuse others can help in the healing process. This does not mean that verbal abuse is right or that it does not hurt others. Some people verbally abuse others because:

- They were abused themselves.
- They do not know how to express their emotions.
- They do not know how to solve problems without becoming angry.
- They use drugs or alcohol, which makes it hard for them to control their words and actions.
- They have a mental illness that makes it hard for them to control their behaviour.

How Do You Help Children Heal from Verbal Abuse?

Reaffirm their value. Remind them often that God loves them. They are always precious and valuable to Him.

Use a lot of praise and encouragement.

Teach them to understand helpful criticism. Helpful criticism is advice that is meant to improve something. It helps these children grow into successful adults. Helpful criticism should be truthful, focus on behaviour, and help children think about things they can change for the better. Helpful criticism should always be shared privately.

Allow these children to share their emotions and talk about how verbal abuse affects them.

Tell the children that they can heal with God's help.

Repeat all the things on this list over and over. You are helping these children to learn new patterns of thought about themselves.