

Summary report

Words Matter: Impact and Prevention of Childhood Verbal Abuse 11 April 2024

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Professor Peter Fonagy



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Foreword

Professor Peter Fonagy, Head of the Division of Psychology & Language Sciences, University College London, UK and CEO, Anna Freud. Morning Chair at Words Matter Conference

It is with great pleasure and a sense of urgency that I introduce this summary report of the Words Matter Conference. Through this landmark conference, the first of its kind on childhood verbal abuse by adults, we embarked on a journey of enlightenment and action, driven by the profound insights shared by esteemed speakers and ground-breaking research presented on the issue.

I must acknowledge the visionary leadership of Jessica Bondy, whose unwavering commitment led to the establishment of the Words Matter charity, the world's first organisation dedicated solely to addressing childhood verbal abuse by adults. Jessica's foresight and determination have ignited a movement that demands our attention and action.

As we consider the discussions and findings of this conference, let us confront a stark reality: actions such as belittling, shouting, and using threatening language towards children inflict deep wounds that can last a lifetime. Despite the misguided notion that verbal intimidation leaves no scars, we must recognise that words are indeed one of humanity's most powerful tools, capable of shaping destinies and altering lives. Throughout history, the adage "spare the rod and spoil the child" has perpetuated a harmful cycle of physical punishment. Yet, we are far less aware of the equally damaging consequences of verbal abuse. Children, inherently trusting of the adults in their lives, absorb words as gospel, shaping their identities and understanding of the world.

We must acknowledge that verbal abuse of children extends beyond the confines of the family unit, permeating educational, sports, and leisure contexts. From the playground to the dance studio, the culture of bullying and body shaming leaves

indelible scars on impressionable minds. Words Matter emerges as a beacon of hope in the fight against childhood verbal abuse.

By raising awareness and supporting preventive initiatives, this charity stands at the forefront of child protection efforts. The risks associated with verbal abuse—ranging from low self-esteem to mental health disorders—are undeniable, yet they are also modifiable.

While reading about the well-regarded voices in this field through this summary report, let us recognise the transformative power of prevention. Mental health disorders plague societies worldwide, yet the prevention of childhood verbal abuse offers a tangible solution. It is incumbent upon us to collectively act, to heed the call of Words Matter, and to safeguard the well-being of future generations.

This report is intended to summarise some incredible research and practices undertaken in the space of understanding and preventing childhood verbal abuse. But this needs to be the starting point of much more research, and in particular coming together to develop preventive solutions to such abuse. Mental health disorders are at an all-time high around the world and prevention of childhood verbal abuse is one of the most effective levers available to us to tackle this global challenge. It is incumbent upon us to collectively act, to heed the call of Words Matter, and to safeguard the well-being of future generations.

Together, let us build a world where words nurture, empower, and uplift children, for they are the architects of our collective future.

Professor Peter Fonagy

Foreword

Dr. Manasi Kumar, Research Professor at the Institute for Excellence in Health Equity, NYU Grossman School of Medicine and Affiliate Associate Professor at the Department of Psychiatry, University of Nairobi, Kenya. Afternoon Chair at the Words Matter Conference

As we reflect on the wealth of insights shared during this remarkable conference, I am grateful for the engaging discussions and thoughtful participation from all who contributed to the conference. Building upon the foundation laid by our esteemed speakers, I am compelled to emphasise the critical importance of recognising childhood verbal abuse as a potent catalyst for a cascade of adverse experiences.

In my own research on adverse childhood and community experiences in diverse regions such as Asia and Africa, I have witnessed how childhood verbal abuse represents the tip of the iceberg. Yet, its significance cannot be understated. Verbal abuse serves as a triggering and profoundly disruptive force, setting the stage for a myriad of detrimental outcomes that reverberate across individuals and communities. It is imperative that we broaden our understanding of verbal abuse beyond its traditional confines, recognising that it is not solely confined to children but also extends to adolescents and young people. In many parts of the world, verbal abuse is regrettably commonplace, perpetuating cycles of harm and trauma that ripple through society.

Furthermore, as we strive to cultivate mental health-friendly societies, the recognition that words matter takes on even greater significance. We must confront the pervasive harm inflicted by global abuse, particularly upon vulnerable populations such as child and youth migrant workers, caregiving children and youth, those living with disabilities, and individuals grappling with chronic diseases. However, in acknowledging the power of words to wound, we must also recognise their potential to heal and foster resilience.

I am heartened to witness the collaboration between WHO and the Words Matter charity, under the steadfast leadership of Jessica Bondy and the dedicated team at

UCL. This partnership exemplifies our collective commitment to advancing evidence-based interventions that span policy, community, education, and healthcare sectors.

As we navigate the complexities of addressing childhood verbal abuse, let us heed the call to action articulated by our speakers today. Let us advocate for policy-level interventions, harnessing the power of evidence-based approaches to safeguard the well-being of our children and youth. Together, let us embark on a journey of healing and empowerment, where words are wielded not as weapons of harm, but as tools of compassion and resilience.

Dr. Manasi Kumar

Words Matter – The founder's story

Jessica Bondy, Founder Words Matter, UK

Jessica Bondy, a seasoned communications professional with a portfolio that boasts brands like British Airways, Samsung, Mars, and Procter & Gamble, and founder of the Words Matter charity, presented at the Words Matter Conference with a profound message. Her presentation focussed on her inspiring journey encapsulating the story behind the creation of Words Matter. Bondy's presentation best captured the core mission and goals for which the Words Matter charity stands.

Reflecting on her journey and experiences, Jessica shared a pivotal moment from a course she attended two years ago, focussed on empowering women to find their voices. The session prompted participants to ponder their legacies if they were to pass away within six months. For Jessica, this exercise led to a profound realisation: she wanted her legacy to be about ending verbal abuse of children by adults, driven by her own experiences and those of the young people she had coached and mentored over the years. This exercise ultimately sowed the seeds of the world's first charity focussing on childhood verbal abuse.

Jessica emphasised the lasting impact of words, drawing from personal anecdotes and the stories of individuals she had encountered. Recalling a poignant moment from her teenage years, Jessica highlighted how words can extinguish the light of hope and shape one's future. Motivated by her epiphany, shaped by her own childhood experience, Jessica founded the Words Matter charity which was launched in September 2023. It is the first organisation in the world dedicated solely to addressing verbal abuse of children by adults. Behind the creation of Words Matter was extensive research which made Jessica realise the lasting damage which childhood verbal abuse can lead to and the serious outcomes for children, ranging from anxiety, depression, to eating disorders, sleep issues, substance abuse and even self harm. Yet behind closed doors, verbal abuse of children by adults is going on in households, in schools, in gyms, in ballet schools, on the sports field and beyond, unnoticed and unrecognised compared to other forms of abuse. Jolted by this realisation, Jessica decided to reach out to experts in

the field working on childhood verbal abuse, laying the foundations of Words Matter with its strategic aims: conducting research to provide further validation of the consequences; raising awareness through education, training, resources, events and media campaigns; and collaboration with others to help develop, deliver and scale interventions that will positively engage adults to drive behaviour and systems change.

So far, Words Matter, under Jessica's leadership, has commissioned four pieces of research. The results of these studies unveiled shocking statistics, revealing that 2 in 5 children experience verbal abuse by adults, with over half experiencing it weekly and 1 in 10 children daily. Research also disclosed that behind this form of abuse were a myriad of faces: ranging from parents, caregivers, teachers, activity leaders, coaches and friends, to bus conductors and shopkeepers. Following these stark revelations, Words Matter led an evidence-based advocacy to raise awareness about childhood verbal abuse, engaging with a wide range of stakeholders from media to leading charities and even parliamentarians. Jessica emphasised the need for a distinct recognition of this form of abuse, which can have profound and lasting effects on children's mental health and well-being.

Conclusion

In her closing remarks, Jessica urged attendees to reflect on the power of their words and join the mission to end verbal abuse of children. She emphasised the importance of positive affirmations and stable relationships in nurturing children's self-esteem and resilience, highlighting that change is possible if everyone works together. As Jessica concluded her presentation, she left the audience with a poignant reminder: "Let's build children up, not knock them down." Through collective effort and awareness, the Words Matter charity strives to create a world where children can grow and thrive free from the wounds of verbal abuse.

Childhood verbal abuse as a maltreatment subtype: Exploring the unification of definitions and measures and future implications

Professor Shanta R. Dube, Ph.D., MPH, Professor and Director, Master of Public Health Program, Department of Public Health in the Levine College of Health Sciences, Wingate University, USA

Professor Shanta Dube's presentation shed light on the overlooked issue of childhood verbal abuse within the broader context of emotional abuse and other maltreatment sub-types. Despite its increased prevalence, childhood verbal abuse remains under-recognized and under-addressed in both research and practice. Professor Dube's presentation brought to the fore some of the definitions, measures, and implications of childhood verbal abuse, emphasising its distinct nature and impact.

In current research and practice, childhood verbal abuse is either subsumed within the subtype of emotional abuse or acknowledged through alternate terms like emotional maltreatment, psychological abuse, psychological maltreatment, among others. Through her research, Professor Dube made a compelling case for recognising childhood verbal abuse as a distinct maltreatment subtype itself.

Through this study commissioned by Words Matter, Professor Dube presented the results of a first-of-its-kind systematic review undertaken to evaluate the research literature on associated definitions and measures used to assess childhood verbal abuse as a form of maltreatment. The review of over 160 studies also aimed to examine both the immediate and long-term outcomes associated with childhood verbal abuse. The systematic review revealed that verbal abuse was the most frequently used term in existing studies of emotional abuse, followed by 'verbal hostility'. Only 6% of all studies examined used the term 'emotional abuse', implying that even though emotional abuse is currently identified as a sub-type of maltreatment, researchers and practitioners appear to investigate verbal abuse to children by adults.

The study also revealed that different forms of adult speech behaviours such as the use of criticising words, name calling and other contemptuous remarks lead to an almost immediate impact on children and adolescents such as loss of feeling loved, a feeling of hatred, rejection, emotional harm and more. Moreover, there are also long-term consequences of childhood verbal abuse which the study brings to the fore, ranging from anger, depression, frustration, suicidality, revenge-seeking among children and adolescents to depression, emotional and mental health problems among young adults and psychiatric disorders among older adults. Interestingly, the study does not restrict itself to studies involving parents and caregivers but also includes studies involving teachers and coaches, highlighting that verbal abuse can occur by any adult working with children, not only parents.

Conclusion

The trends revealed by Professor Dube's research point to a pressing need to recognise 'childhood verbal abuse' as a maltreatment subtype distinct from emotional abuse, rather than its classification within emotional abuse. Verbal abuse puts a focus on the speech behaviours of adults towards children, while emotional abuse focuses on the aftermath to child victims, thus overlooking the crucial role that adults play in the process. Preventing and addressing childhood verbal abuse provides an opportunity to help adults with their speech behaviours and unhealed trauma.

Professor Dube's compelling study points researchers and practitioners within the field of childhood maltreatment in an important direction: the need to recognise childhood verbal abuse as a distinct measure, term, and form of childhood abuse so that it can be detected and prevented. Removing verbal abuse from being subsumed within definitions of childhood emotional abuse will lead to greater recognition, prevention of its occurrence and move attention away from the child victims that suffer from emotional abuse caused by verbal abuse.

Prevalence and impact of verbal abuse and other forms of childhood adversity

Professor Mark Bellis, Director of Research, and Innovation at Liverpool John Moores University and founder of WHO Collaborating Centre in Violence Prevention

Through his presentation at the Words Matter Conference, Professor Mark Bellis delved into the intricate web of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their implications, shedding light on the multifaceted repercussions of childhood verbal abuse. Collaborating closely in his research with Professor Karen Hughes, Professor of Public Health, Bangor University, Dr. Bellis presented a preliminary analysis of his research that underscored the pervasive impact of childhood verbal abuse on individuals' neurodevelopment and long-term well-being.

Professor Bellis began his presentation by contextualising ACEs as events that can disrupt crucial developmental processes, spanning neurological, hormonal, and immunological domains. These disruptions, whether direct or indirect, often manifest in a myriad of social, emotional, and cognitive challenges, setting the stage for maladaptive coping mechanisms and detrimental behavioural patterns. Drawing from international data, he highlighted the prevalence of ACEs across diverse socio-cultural contexts, emphasising the sobering reality that no population remains untouched by childhood adversity. Notably, while variations exist between countries, the incidence of verbal abuse consistently emerges as a significant concern, affecting a substantial proportion of individuals from all walks of life.

In the United Kingdom, Professor Bellis highlights a notable prevalence of verbal abuse, with approximately 20% of individuals reporting such experiences during childhood. This figure parallels the incidence of physical abuse, underscoring the magnitude of verbal maltreatment within familial and societal contexts. Furthermore, he also shed light on the synergistic relationship between childhood verbal abuse and socio-economic deprivation, wherein marginalised populations bear a disproportionate burden of ACEs. However, crucially, even within affluent

communities, the adverse effects of childhood verbal abuse persist, underscoring its pervasive and indiscriminate nature.

Professor Bellis also shared insights from his ongoing research focussed on the disentanglement of the isolated impacts of verbal abuse from other co-occurring ACEs, such as sexual abuse or exposure to domestic violence. Through meticulous statistical modelling, his research aims to delineate the effects of verbal and physical abuse to children's mental and physical well-being. Preliminary findings of his ongoing research suggest that both verbal and physical abuse during childhood exert significant influences on mental well-being outcomes, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, and issues with the child's self-esteem. Moreover, the co-occurrence of verbal and physical abuse exacerbates these adverse outcomes, highlighting the cumulative toll of multiple ACEs on individuals' psychological resilience.

Professor Bellis also navigated through a series of graphical representations of the data. Patterns emerging out of the data depicted the intricate interplay between ACEs related to childhood verbal abuse and its outcomes on mental well-being. While his analyses are ongoing and the data remains in a draft state, the preliminary insights shared by Professor Bellis underscored the urgent imperative to address childhood verbal abuse as a critical public health concern.

Conclusion

In essence, Professor Mark Bellis's latest research endeavours to point towards the need for urging stakeholders across sectors to prioritise the prevention and mitigation of childhood verbal abuse. By elucidating the nuanced dynamics of ACEs and their impacts, Professor Bellis's upcoming work lays the groundwork for targeted interventions to prevent childhood verbal abuse aimed at fostering resilience and safeguarding the well-being of future generations.

The Golden Gift - Developmental support to identify, activate and develop skills that contribute to constructive interaction

Maria Aarts, Director and Founder of Marte Meo International, Eindhoven

Maria Aart's presentation at the Words Matter Conference focussed on her journey in developing the Marte Meo method of educational counselling, shedding light on the impact of parent-child communication on child development, emphasising the need for a concrete and accessible guidance for parents to communicate with their children. Through her presentation, Maria shared her journey of observing and understanding parent-child interactions to develop practical learning sets aimed at empowering parents and caregivers. Through her work, she aims to break cycles of ineffective communication and promote positive parent-child relationships.

During her work within a child psychiatry institution as a young child psychiatrist, Maria had an insightful encounter with a mother who expressed the need for practical information as a parent, to support her child effectively. She recognised the difficulties in explaining scientific observations of a child's problems to parents and other educators, as they are often unable to relate to the pedagogic jargon and identify the relevance of these insights in everyday-life situations. Recognising the gap in guidance, Maria decided to embark on developing accessible language and tools for parents, inspired by real-life interactions with families. Following that encounter, Maria looked into decades of recording careful observation of parent-child interactions, starting from infancy. This led to deep insights into parent-child interactions, particularly in deprived areas where communication gaps were prevalent. These insights led Maria to develop the 'Marte Meo', a method of educational counselling. Through her methodology, interactions between a child and educators are recorded and later watched by parents or other educators to enable discussion together.

Through examples and insights gained from her work, Maria highlighted the importance of communication in infancy, recalling poignant moments where parents

discovered the significance of their encouraging voices and positive interactions in shaping their children's experiences in infancy. Her learning sets aim to empower parents by providing practical strategies to enhance communication and foster child development - seeing it is believing it. She also shared success stories from her international network using her educational tool, where parents and professionals alike have embraced her approach and witnessed positive outcomes in parent-child relationships. Through the learning modules, Maria also introduced the concept of the "Golden Gift," emphasising the profound impact of nurturing and supportive interactions on a child's self-image and confidence at an early stage. According to Maria's observations, simple acts of communication, such as repeating an infant's words and sounds can be instrumental in developing their self confidence. Through guided learning sets, parents learn to recognise and seize opportunities for meaningful interactions, laying the foundation for lifelong emotional well-being.

In addition to supporting parents, Maria's work extends to training professionals in childcare, healthcare, and therapy settings. She emphasised the importance of creating welcoming atmospheres and facilitating emotional connections to promote healthy child development. An absence of communication or misguided communication could also create aggressive behaviour among children, as highlighted by Maria's observations.

Conclusion

Through her presentation, Maria underscored the transformative power of concrete guidance and positive, nurturing interactions in parent-child communication. Early communication between parents and children can crucially shape the emotional and psychological behaviour of a child. Through tools like Marte Meo, Maria continues to equip parents and professionals with the tools to break detrimental cycles and foster positive relationships, ultimately enriching the lives of children worldwide.

Costs of inaction against childhood verbal abuse: Implications for society and the economy

Professor Xiangming Fang, Professor & Director of the Center for Health Economics and Policy at China Agricultural University and the School of Public Health at Georgia State University, USA

Professor Xiangming Fang's presentation at the Words Matter Conference shed light on the profound economic implications of failing to address childhood verbal abuse. Through his presentation, Professor Fang shared the findings of a breakthrough study on the economic consequences of childhood verbal abuse and highlighted the economic burden that the prevalence of childhood verbal abuse poses in countries around the world. Through rigorous analyses and comprehensive research models, Professor Fang's study captured the far-reaching consequences of childhood verbal abuse by adults, beyond children, on economies worldwide.

Professor Fang began his presentation by acknowledging the prevalence of childhood verbal abuse as established by research done by academics like Professor Mark Bellis who demonstrated through his study in the UK that 21% of the adults reported experiencing childhood verbal abuse, compared to 15.9% reporting childhood physical abuse and 7.4% reporting childhood sexual abuse. While highlighting this study, Professor Fang also discussed the extent of adverse outcomes for children experiencing childhood verbal abuse, ranging from behavioural problems to chronic diseases, demonstrating the urgency of addressing this form and scale of abuse. Given the prevalence of childhood verbal abuse coupled with the breadth of its short and long term consequences, the economic costs of its prevalence tend to also be high. However, despite this and compared to other forms of violence against children, estimates of the economic costs of childhood verbal abuse are notably limited in most countries and regions globally. An economic estimate of childhood verbal abuse would not only help in raising awareness about the prevailing severity of childhood verbal abuse, but could also potentially strengthen advocacy with policymakers around the issue and push stakeholders to prioritise policies and interventions dedicated to eradicating the

most prevalent form of abuse among children. Beyond this, and as Professor Fang highlighted through his presentation, an analysis of the economic burden of childhood verbal abuse could also help in placing the problem in the context of other public health concerns, allowing a more systemic response.

In his first of its kind study, Professor Fang and his team aimed to estimate the economic burden of CVA in four countries by analysing its effects on selected health outcomes. To do this, he first estimated the prevalence of childhood verbal abuse nationally in four countries. He then used the Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) as a metric to quantify the years lost due to health outcomes attributed to childhood verbal abuse, and converted them into monetary value. The study was conducted using data from the Violence Against Children Surveys (VACS) in Cambodia, Colombia, Kenya and Moldova.

The study disclosed that the estimated impact of Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) lost due to childhood verbal abuse amounted to USD 91 million in Cambodia, USD 1,352 million in Colombia, USD 46 million in Moldova, and USD 211 million in Kenya. Applying the findings to the global level, the estimated global economic impact of DALYs lost due to childhood verbal abuse was approximately USD 298 billion in 2019. Professor Fang's study demonstrates that the economic implications of failing to address childhood verbal abuse are substantial, with an estimated annual cost of around US\$300 billion globally. It points towards an economic boost of approximately 0.34% to the world's GDP by ending childhood verbal abuse.

Conclusion

Professor Xianming Fang's presentation highlights the imperative need to integrate efforts against childhood verbal abuse into budgetary frameworks. It also demonstrates the urgency and importance of heightened investment in coordinated and multisectoral interventions to effectively combat childhood verbal abuse and the consequences associated with it. Prioritising these efforts, can not only improve the well-being of children but also foster economic prosperity and social development on a global scale.

Capitalising on the socio-ecological context: Using data and evidence in practice and policy-making

Catherine Maternowska, Honorary Professor of Violence Prevention for Young People, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, UK and Jonathan Kifunda, Founder and Executive Director, Thubutu Africa Initiatives.

At the Words Matter Conference, Catherine Materowska and Jonathan Kifunda shared their expertise in understanding and addressing childhood verbal abuse from a socio-ecological perspective, drawing also from their diverse experiences of research and practice of designing interventions in Tanzania and beyond. Their collaborative approach demonstrates the need for a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach to address the complex dynamics of childhood verbal abuse and underscores the importance of multi-level interventions to create lasting change.

Professor Maternowska commenced the session by shedding light on the socio-ecological framework within the broader landscape of child protection. Reflecting on the framework's origins in Urie Bronfenbrenner's pioneering work, she underscored its evolution over time and its application in understanding the multi-layered dynamics of violence against children. When applied in research, the framework helps in understanding and explaining the different levels of interaction when a child suffers from any form of violence. She emphasised her newest iteration of this framework the Integrated Child Centred Framework based on years of study.

Using the Integrated Child Centred Framework, Professor Maternowska then highlighted the multi-country study on drivers of violence led by her across Italy, Peru, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Using extensive datasets from CDC and data emerging nationally, along with extensive literature reviews, the study attempted to understand prevailing trends and contextual nuances shaping violence against children. The multilayered study involved reviewing factors at the institutional and

structural levels that create the conditions where violence is likely to occur as well as the likelihood of violence occurring due to characteristics measured at the individual, interpersonal and community levels. The study also adopted a human centric approach by engaging with multiple stakeholders and involved national experts from respective governments to interpret the data.

At the structural level the study demonstrated links between historical events like the militancy of the Shining Path guerilla group in the 1980s in Peru to verbal and physical abuse by teachers towards children in school due to a history of generational trauma. The holistic and socio-historical approach of the study also led to diverse outcomes, ranging from building the capacity of statisticians in different governments to contributing towards changing laws and national action plans in the countries which were a part of the study. The data from the study was also used to lobby for budget shifts along with numerous replications of the study with UNICEF country offices.

Applying Professor Maternowska's holistic approach, Jonathan Kifunda shared his experiences in designing multi-sectoral interventions to prevent childhood verbal abuse. He highlighted the community mapping study conducted as part of the "Safe for All" project undertaken by his NGO 'Thubutu Africa Initiatives' in Tanzania. The study used community mapping exercises along with surveys were conducted with children, parents and teachers to understand children and adults's understanding of children's rights, comparative perceptions of safety between the home, school and community, and the role of adults in children's lives and considering different types of violence. The results demonstrated that children had a much better understanding of their rights than adults. The findings also revealed that among adults, the majority felt that yelling at children is normal and a part of disciplinary action and their duty, whereas among children, verbal abuse was considered the most painful type of violence, even more so than physical abuse. Furthermore, mothers were identified as the main perpetrators of verbal abuse. The study also pointed towards a gendered dimension where social and gender norms between parents perpetuated prevalence of childhood verbal abuse, in cases where women replicate abuse they have received from the male household heads onto children.

Based on the findings of the report, Thubutu led a three-pronged intervention model to prevent childhood verbal abuse collaborating with local parenting programmes at the household level, working with junior councils to give a voice to children and to develop new by-laws. Revealing disparities in perceptions of children's rights and the normalisation of verbal abuse, Kifunda's intervention in Tanzania underscored the socio-cultural factors influencing intergenerational cycles of violence. Furthermore, Kifunda also emphasised the need for targeted interventions aimed at challenging gender norms and fostering supportive environments that empower children, especially girls, to assert their rights and seek redress for abuse.

Conclusion

Professor Materowska and Kifunda elaborated on prioritising children's voices and leveraging existing community structures, to see tangible progress around increasing awareness, and preventing cases of childhood verbal abuse. Collaborative efforts with stakeholders facilitated the integration of community perspectives into national action plans and the development of gender-responsive interventions aimed at addressing underlying gender inequalities in the prevalence of childhood verbal abuse. The presentations underscored the imperative of collaborative approaches in addressing childhood verbal abuse. By intertwining theoretical frameworks with practical interventions grounded in community engagement and gender-responsive approaches, their work exemplifies the power of collective action in safeguarding children's rights and well-being. Their collaborative endeavours serve as a catalyst for change, inspiring stakeholders to unite in a concerted effort to address childhood verbal abuse worldwide.

The neurobiological consequences of childhood verbal abuse

Dr. Martin Teicher, Ph.D., MD, Director of the Developmental Biopsychiatry Research Program at McLean Hospital and Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School.

Dr. Martin Teicher's presentation at the Words Matter Conference demonstrated his meticulous investigation into the neurobiological consequences of childhood verbal abuse. While often underestimated, recent research underscores the profound and enduring impact of verbal abuse on individuals' neurodevelopment and mental well-being. Dr. Teicher's research offered invaluable insights into a realm of adversity arising from childhood verbal abuse, often overshadowed by other forms of abuse.

Dr. Teicher's presentation began with a recollection of how he and his team embarked on a multifaceted exploration, beginning with the development of a comprehensive verbal abuse scale to assess its clinical repercussions. This scale sought to capture the nuanced experiences of individuals subjected to parental verbal abuse, encompassing a spectrum from swearing and yelling, to condemnation and negation. Their findings revealed that parental verbal abuse emerges as a potent risk factor for psychopathology, with implications surpassing those of physical abuse in certain instances. Using this scale, Dr. Teicher's team uncovered notable alterations in both grey and white matter structures among individuals exposed to verbal abuse during childhood. It also established that parental verbal abuse was as significant a risk factor for psychopathology as witnessing domestic violence and extra familial sexual abuse, and on some measures was even more significant risk factor than parental physical abuse.

Using this scale and further neuroimaging, research also proved that childhood verbal abuse significantly affected three fibre pathways in the brain. First, it reduced the integrity of the 'arcuate fasciculus', a pathway associated with individuals' verbal IQ and verbal comprehension. Second, it affected the singular bundle fibre

tract in the brain risking depression and dissociation. Lastly, it affected the fornix of the brain risking greater effects of symptoms of anxiety and somatization. Dr. Teicher also highlighted studies that demonstrate that beyond immediate impacts, childhood verbal abuse has serious long-term impacts on a child's brain. For instance, childhood verbal abuse affects the somatosensory cortex of a brain which later in life leaves profound effects on the child's ability to experience pleasure. He also highlighted that childhood verbal abuse affects multiple key regions in the brain which play an important role in the executive function including attention, response inhibition, processing and regulation, verbal memory, working memory, autobiographical memory, processing visual and spatial processing, social cognition and more.

Furthermore, investigations into the effects of verbal abuse from peers and through cyberbullying unveiled parallels in their impact on mental health outcomes, underscoring the pervasive nature of verbal abuse across social domains. Notably, Dr. Teicher's research also looked into the intricate interplay between verbal abuse, parental affection, and mental well-being. While parental warmth failed to ameliorate the adverse effects of verbal abuse, its presence was associated with improved overall well-being—a testament to the multifaceted nature of parent-child relationships.

Moreover, the age at which children experience verbal abuse also emerged as a critical determinant in Dr. Teicher's research, with distinct brain regions exhibiting vulnerability at different developmental stages of a child's growth. To test this, Dr. Teicher developed an instrument called the 'Maltreatment and Abuse Chronology of Exposure' (MACE) and found that while childhood verbal abuse significantly affected brain volume, there were also differences in how it affected male and female brains. In addition, the age in which childhood verbal abuse was experienced by a child, determined the increase or decrease in the brain volume in specific regions of the brain. The research also finds that there are key differences in when males and females appear to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of parental verbal abuse.

Conclusion

Understanding the temporal nuances of childhood verbal abuse, as highlighted by Dr. Teicher's presentation, sheds light on the complex interplay between adverse experiences due to childhood verbal abuse and brain development, informing targeted intervention strategies. Dr. Teicher's pioneering work underscores the urgent need to recognise and address verbal abuse as a significant form of maltreatment. By elucidating its neurobiological underpinnings, his research offers a compelling rationale for proactive intervention and prevention efforts aimed at safeguarding the mental health of vulnerable individuals.

Moving from research to practice

Dr. Alexander Butchart, Unit Head, and Dr. Berit Kieselbach, Technical Officer, Violence Prevention Unit, Department of Social Determinants of Health, World Health Organization (WHO)

In their presentation at the conference, Dr. Alexander Butchart and Dr. Berit Kieselbach discussed the intricacies of effective and practical parenting interventions aimed at preventing child maltreatment and fostering healthier parent-child relationships by sharing a set of evidence-based practical guidelines on parenting to prevent the maltreatment of children and enhance parent-child relationships.

Dr. Butchart commenced the presentation by extending gratitude to the researchers whose exhaustive reviews formed the bedrock of the guidelines discussed, notably recognising the contributions of Professor Francis Gardner and Sophia Backhaus from Oxford University's Department of Social Policy and Intervention. He also underscored the imperative of bridging the gap between research findings and practical implementation through guidelines, a cornerstone of WHO's mission. He discussed the process involved in crafting these guidelines, which entails collaboration between researchers and stakeholders from diverse global regions. WHO guidelines contain evidence-based recommendations for users on what they should do in specific situations to achieve the best health outcomes possible.

Transitioning into the adverse impacts of harsh parenting for children's well being, Dr. Kieselbach continued the presentation to highlight the three types of harsh or violent parenting including emotional, physical and sexual abuse. Emotional abuse subsumes childhood verbal abuse under patterns of behaviour that are belittling, blaming, threatening, frightening, discriminatory behaviours and ridiculing. She then presented the 'WHO Guidelines on Parenting Interventions to Prevent Maltreatment and Enhance Parent-Child Relationships with Children Aged 0-17 Years'. These guidelines draw on a large amount of evidence showing that interventions to prevent harsh and violent parenting and enhance parent-child relationships are effective in reducing many high-priority public health challenges.

These parenting interventions aim to improve parent-child interaction and the quality of parenting and are accompanied by manuals, providing step-by-step instructions to ensure that they are delivered in a way similar to the original intervention tested. The interventions are highly structured and directed at parents and caregivers to develop new skills.

Dr. Kieselbach also highlighted the essential components of effective parenting interventions which include non-violent discipline techniques, proactive parenting techniques, positive reinforcements, parental self-management skills and improving parent-child relationships. The guidelines prioritise seven pivotal outcomes, ranging from mitigating harsh and negative parenting behaviours to bolstering parental mental health and reducing child behavioural problems. Additionally, the guidelines also lay out four key recommendations along with one recommendation from WHO's Guideline on Early Childhood Development. These recommendations advocate for accessible parenting interventions in low and middle-income countries, emphasising the importance of equitable access to evidence-based support services while underscoring the guidelines' adaptability to complex, real-world scenarios.

Dr. Kieselbach also introduced a forthcoming handbook designed to complement the guidelines, offering stakeholders practical insights into implementing and scaling up parenting interventions. Categorised into essential, moderate, and advanced actions, the handbook aims to empower stakeholders with actionable strategies for navigating diverse implementation challenges. She also underscored the handbook's role in fostering sustainability and scalability, particularly in resource-constrained environments where effective intervention delivery is paramount.

Conclusion

Dr. Alexander Butchart and Dr. Berit Kieselbach's presentation reiterated the pivotal role of evidence-based parenting interventions in preventing childhood verbal abuse. With a concerted global effort, these interventions have the potential to effectuate significant reductions in the rates of childhood verbal abuse, especially in middle income countries, ushering in a brighter, more resilient future for generations to come.

Closing remarks

Professor Peter Fonagy, Head of the Division of Psychology & Language Sciences, University College London, UK and CEO, Anna Freud

I hope the summaries of the multitude of research and insights presented at the Words Matter Conference convey the profound impact words have, especially on the impressionable minds of children. The conclusions of this event underscore a fundamental truth: words shape who we are and who we become. Throughout our lives, we carry with us the echoes of the words spoken to us in our formative years. Warm and inspiring words serve as the foundation upon which we build our identities, instilling us with confidence and resilience. Conversely, hurtful words inflict wounds that may remain invisible but leave lasting scars on our psyche.

The mission of Words Matter is clear: to end the verbal abuse of children by the adults around them. It is a mission born out of necessity, with 2 in 5 children experiencing verbal abuse—a staggering statistic that demands our attention and action. As adults, we must acknowledge our capacity to inadvertently harm children with our words, but we must also recognise our power to heal and uplift. It is never too late to course correct, to apologise, and to commit to fostering a nurturing environment where children can thrive.

Through research, awareness-raising efforts, and collaboration with like-minded individuals and organisations, Words Matter seeks to lighten the burden and support those who care for our children. But we cannot achieve this mission alone. We need you—parents, carers, teachers, community members, decision makers—to join us in our drive to end childhood verbal abuse.

Together, let us reaffirm the importance of positive communication and empowerment. Let us build children up, not knock them down. For in the end, words truly do matter, and it is through our collective efforts that we can create a brighter, more compassionate world for future generations.

Professor Peter Fonagy

Closing

Jessica Bondy, Founder, Words Matter, UK

As we conclude this summary report of the Words Matter Conference, I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to this momentous event. Your presence, insights, and dedication have made this gathering an invaluable platform for raising awareness and fostering collaboration in our shared mission to end childhood verbal abuse.

Throughout the conference, we were privileged to hear from an array of distinguished speakers who shared their expertise, research findings, and personal experiences. From Professor Peter Fonagy's opening remarks highlighting the profound impact of words on children's development, and Jonathan Kifunda's insights from the field, to WHO's practical guidelines for parenting, and Dr. Kumar's important reminder of the power of words to not only wound, but also their potential to heal and foster resilience, each presentation illuminated the urgent need for collective action against childhood verbal abuse.

The research presented, including groundbreaking studies on the prevalence and consequences of childhood verbal abuse, provided a sobering reminder of the magnitude of childhood verbal abuse. From the startling statistics revealing the frequency of verbal abuse experienced by children to the profound long-term effects on their mental health and well-being, the evidence presented underscored the imperative for intervention and prevention efforts.

Importantly, the conference served as a catalyst for collaboration and dialogue among stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. Through engaging discussions and interactive sessions, participants explored strategies for raising awareness, implementing evidence-based interventions, and fostering supportive environments for children.

As we reflect on the insights shared and the momentum generated during this conference, let us recommit ourselves to the cause of ending childhood verbal

abuse by adults. Together, we have the power to effect meaningful change and create a world where every child feels valued, respected, and heard.

I encourage all readers to continue their engagement with Words Matter and other organisations working tirelessly to protect children . By working together, we can build a future where words are used to uplift and empower, rather than diminish and harm. The message following this conference is clear, let's build children up not knock them down and we can create a better world.

Thank you once again for your commitment to this important cause.

Jessica Bondy
Founder, Words Matter