

Summary report

Words Matter: Impact and Prevention of Childhood Verbal Abuse by Adults

House of Commons discussion 28 April 2025



Key Facts

2 in 5

(41%) children experience
verbal abuse by adults

1 in 10

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

- In the UK, up to 2 in 5 (41%)¹ children experience verbal abuse by adults which can lead to lifelong consequences to their mental and physical health and development. Of these, over half experience it weekly and one in 10 daily.
- Parents, carers, teachers, activity leaders and coaches are the primary sources of childhood verbal abuse.
- Childhood verbal abuse is now recognised as the most prevalent form of child maltreatment.²
- Children in the UK have the lowest level of life satisfaction of any country in Europe³, with over 270,000 children waiting for assistance after an initial referral for mental health care and long waiting times for support being a major issue.
- Half of mental health conditions arise by age 14 and many of them start to develop in the first years of life.⁴
- Evidence shows that children who experience verbal abuse from adults are nearly twice as likely to become perpetrators or victims of violence, or to face incarceration in adulthood.⁵
- The global economic cost of childhood verbal abuse – based solely on health consequences – is estimated at £239 billion annually.⁶

1. Research among children was undertaken by Family, Kids & Youth (FK&Y), led by Dr Barbie Clarke between 1 June and 20 June 2023. 1,166 responses were received (children aged 11–17 years), with 53% (n=619) boys and 47% (n=543) girls, with good representation across all age groups and UK regions.

2. S.R.Dube et al, [Childhood verbal abuse as child maltreatment subtype: a systematic review of the current evidence](#), Child Abuse & Neglect: The International Journal Volume 144, October 2023, 106394.

3. <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2024>

4. <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2023/10/21/rcpsych-urges-government-to-act-as-children-under-five-face-lifelong-mental-health-conditions>

5. Bellis et al, [Comparing relationships between single types of adverse childhood experiences and health-related outcomes: a combined primary data study of eight cross-sectional surveys in England and Wales](#), BMJ Open, Volume 13, Issue 4, 2023

6. [Groundbreaking study](#) reveals economic burden of childhood verbal abuse by adults estimated at \$300 billion globally

Summary

On 28 April 2025, Words Matter hosted a crucial discussion at the House of Commons about why preventing childhood verbal abuse by adults should be central to the Government's aim of raising the healthiest generation of children in history.

Chaired by Sharon Hodgson MP, the event focused on recent evidence highlighting the serious and lasting effects of verbal abuse - experienced by 2 in 5 children (41%) - which significantly impacts both individuals and wider society.

Speakers included:

- **Professor Peter Fonagy** - Head of the Division of Psychology & Language Sciences at UCL and Government Advisor
- **Professor Eamon McCrory** - CEO of Anna Freud and Professor of Developmental Neuroscience and Psychopathology at UCL
- **Professor Karen Hughes** - Professor of Public Health at Public Health Wales, Bangor University, and Expert Advisor to WHO
- **Professor Andrea Danese** - Professor of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry at King's College London, and General Secretary of the European Association for Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
- **Jessica Bondy** - Founder, Words Matter

More than 70 people attended, including MPs, Peers, policy advisors, child development and mental health professionals, educators, clinicians, public health experts, safeguarding leads, and researchers. The event emphasised the need for verbal abuse prevention to become integral to national strategies for children's health, mental wellbeing, education, and safeguarding, calling for a fundamental societal change in how adults interact with children.

Background and context

Childhood verbal abuse - defined to include blaming, shaming, belittling, threatening, and other forms of emotionally hostile language from adults - is now recognised as the most common form of child maltreatment.

In the UK, it is estimated that up to 2 in 5 (41%) children experience verbal abuse from adults, increasing the risk of significant mental health difficulties and broad impacts on their social and emotional development. Yet, despite these alarming figures, verbal abuse remains largely invisible within public discussions, services, and policy.

Words Matter is the first charity globally to focus solely on ending childhood verbal abuse. Founder Jessica Bondy opened the discussion with a call for urgent and coordinated national action. She highlighted that this serious and escalating issue has long been overlooked and neglected. Bondy argued passionately for the urgent recognition of childhood verbal abuse by adults, consistent monitoring, greater public awareness, and comprehensive training for all adults working with children. She summarised the lasting impact succinctly: *"Words matter. They stick. They last a lifetime. They shape who we are and who we become."* She framed verbal abuse clearly as a preventable public health crisis that, unless addressed, carries profound, lifelong, and costly consequences.

Opening remarks: Political and institutional recognition

MP Sharon Hodgson, a long-term champion of children's mental health and wellbeing, welcomed colleagues from both Houses, representatives from the Department of Health and Social Care, and delegates from charities, clinical practice, academia, and educational and public health sectors.

Reflecting on her past role as Shadow Public Health Minister and Shadow Children's Minister, Hodgson admitted that verbal abuse was absent from nearly a decade of policy briefings. She emphasised the unique political opportunity provided by the current Government's stated commitments to "*raising the healthiest generation in history*" and "*breaking down barriers to opportunity*," urging policymakers to embed verbal abuse prevention into national strategies.

Defining the issue: What is childhood verbal abuse by adults?

Professor Peter Fonagy described four main categories of verbal abuse: overt hostility (such as name-calling, belittling), rejection ("*I don't love you*," "*I wish you weren't here*"), terrorising (threats exploiting a child's fears), and inconsistency (unpredictable responses that damage trust). He emphasised the long-term neurobiological and psychological harm caused by such interactions, illustrating this with both personal and clinical examples. Fonagy highlighted international variation, noting higher prevalence in the US and certain parts of Africa compared to Europe, suggesting that cultural attitudes and policies significantly influence levels of verbal abuse.

Professor Eamon McCrory stressed that children are biologically sensitive to verbal input, especially from trusted adults, making harsh language uniquely harmful when internalised. Drawing from his own experiences, he illustrated how early negative verbal interactions can profoundly affect self-image, identity, and aspirations across life. McCrory characterised verbal abuse as a betrayal of children's inherent trust in adults, with a range of potential developmental, psychological, and social consequences.

Professor Karen Hughes shared evidence from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) studies, showing a marked decline in reported physical abuse but a troubling increase in verbal abuse among younger generations. Older adults reported more physical abuse in childhood, whereas younger adults increasingly identify verbal abuse as their predominant adverse childhood experience. Hughes attributed this shift to better recognition and successful prevention strategies for physical abuse, contrasting this with the persistent lack of attention and intervention directed towards verbal maltreatment.

Professor Andrea Danese stressed that words alone can significantly harm children's wellbeing, leaving psychological scars that endure for life. Children rely on language from adults in their immediate social environment to learn about themselves and the world. The language used by adults with children can therefore be very powerful, in good and bad ways. Encouraging language helps children learn, recover, and thrive, while being subject to verbal abuse distorts their self-perception and understanding of their place in society.

Health and social impact and consequences of childhood verbal abuse by adults

All speakers emphasised the profound and lasting impacts of childhood verbal abuse.

Professor Eamon McCrory discussed neuroimaging studies indicating that brain alterations associated with verbal abuse overlap with the same brain regions implicated in other kinds of maltreatment, including physical and sexual abuse. These include regions responsible for detecting threats, experiencing rewards, and processing personal memories. These neural changes are thought to be associated with increased risks for depression, anxiety, PTSD, suicidal behaviours, and difficulties in relationships. He explained that because children biologically depend on adults, repeated harsh verbal messages from trusted caregivers can over time become deeply folded into a child's sense of self, increasing the risk of long-term emotional harm. McCrory further noted the evidence indicating that the erosion of trust caused by verbal abuse can undermine a child's later ability to develop secure romantic relationships, increasing the risk of lifelong cycles of loneliness and social isolation.

Professor Karen Hughes presented evidence from population-level ACE studies, demonstrating that adults reporting childhood verbal abuse alone, without additional adversities, faced increased risks of negative outcomes including early pregnancy, substance misuse, poor mental health, involvement in crime, and violent behaviour. Notably, these risks were greater than for several other isolated ACEs, reinforcing the critical need to address verbal abuse as a distinct public health concern.

Professor Andrea Danese highlighted key findings concerning the importance of subjective experiences. Longitudinal studies showed that personal recollections of abuse - not the objective severity of incidents - most strongly predicted mental health problems later in life. Individuals who remembered childhood abuse displayed significantly higher rates of psychopathology, irrespective of official documentation. The strength of the associations between subjective experiences of emotional and verbal abuse with psychopathology is the same as for the subjective experiences of physical and sexual abuse.

Lived experience and children's data

Jessica Bondy drew on personal stories and data to illustrate the reality of verbal abuse. She reported that 41% of children in the UK experience verbal abuse from adults; of these, more than half encounter abuse weekly, and one in ten daily. Parents, carers, teachers and coaches are the main verbal perpetrators. Bondy emphasised that verbal abuse often involves subtle, quiet cruelty rather than obvious shouting.

Bondy referenced research involving over 1,000 children, showing hurtful phrases like "You are stupid," "You are useless," and "I am ashamed of you" consistently produced feelings of sadness, low confidence, depression, anxiety, isolation, fear and diminished self-worth. These emotional consequences can persist for decades, influencing educational achievement, relationship quality and ultimately lifetime economic potential.

Bondy also noted that adults, including parents, carers and teachers often unintentionally inflict verbal harm without recognising its effects. She shared findings from Words Matter's research in which many parents expressed guilt and regret over harmful remarks made during moments of stress.

Power of positive words

Speakers underscored the crucial role of positive communication and supportive caregiving in promoting emotional wellbeing and resilience.

Professor Eamon McCrory emphasised that just as children are biologically sensitive to negative words, they are equally responsive to positive messages. He described how supportive, affirming interactions from trusted adults profoundly shape children's self-worth, identity and emotional security from an early age. McCrory stressed that positive interactions help children build the resilience necessary to manage challenges and emphasised that adults should be supported to provide clear, encouraging boundaries constructively.

Jessica Bondy further elaborated on research findings from over 1,000 children who identified the most helpful phrases they heard from adults, including *"I am proud of you," "I'm here for you,"* and *"It's ok to make mistakes, you can learn from them."* Children reported feeling happier, more confident and supported when receiving such positive messages, underlining the importance of affirming language in nurturing children's mental health and wellbeing.

Conference attendees shared similar views, recounting experiences from both personal and professional contexts in which positive language transformed children's behaviour and emotional engagement, particularly in educational settings. They raised the effectiveness of descriptive praise - explicitly naming specific positive behaviours rather than offering vague approval - as highly impactful both in classrooms and at home. One attendee noted how a teacher's deliberate shift in language markedly improved her daughter's confidence and conduct.

Throughout the discussion, there was broad consensus that children benefit significantly when adults communicate with empathy, clarity and belief. While negative words leave harmful imprints, positive words have a unique power to foster confidence, strengthen relationships and unlock potential. Parenting and caregiving, whether by families or professionals, was consistently presented not as an issue of blame but as an opportunity for societal investment, education and support.

Recognition and prevention of childhood verbal abuse

The discussion addressed cultural and structural factors contributing to the ongoing neglect of childhood verbal abuse. Speakers agreed that policy and public attention continue to prioritise visible, physical harm over emotional maltreatment.

Professor Andrea Danese critiqued the legacy of Cartesian thinking, warning that artificial distinctions between mind and body have diminished recognition of psychological trauma.

Professor Eamon McCrory strongly emphasised that verbal abuse is neither inevitable nor trivial; it is fully preventable and addressing it is critical for safeguarding healthy brain development and lifelong mental health outcomes. While repeated and sustained pattern of verbal abuse significantly increases the risk of long-term harm it is incumbent on adults to reflect on using harsh words against children if they are intended to demean, reject or threaten, regardless of a clinically defined threshold for childhood verbal abuse.

Panellists highlighted that although verbal abuse leaves biological and psychological marks, it continues to be minimised as transient or inconsequential.

Three major gaps emerged consistently from the discussion:

- 1. Definition and monitoring** - Verbal abuse often remains hidden within broader categories like emotional abuse, resulting in under-recognition in official data, service provision and policy interventions. Currently, no nationally agreed definition exists, nor is there routine data collection specifically for verbal abuse.
- 2. Awareness and training** - Adults including parents, carers, teachers and coaches - frequently lack understanding of what constitutes verbal abuse and how it impacts children. Existing training typically prioritises safeguarding from physical harm rather than addressing relational dynamics or harmful communication.
- 3. Cultural and structural change** - Speakers called for a widespread societal movement to normalise compassionate, respectful communication with children. Wales' recently launched Whole-Society Trauma Framework was cited as an encouraging example of embedding trauma awareness and prevention across multiple sectors.

Professor Peter Fonagy identified parenting programmes as the most effective evidence-based intervention for reducing mental health problems in children, noting their endorsement in every NICE guideline. He emphasised the importance of normalising parenting education and argued for a cultural shift towards viewing parenting as a learned skill rather than an assumed instinct. Fonagy further stressed that successful parenting interventions should not simply focus on avoiding harm, but actively promote positive behaviours and constructive communication patterns, which are critical for preventing mental health difficulties.

Jessica Bondy provided anecdotal evidence demonstrating how subtle changes in language - especially in parental communication - can significantly enhance relationships. She argued that parenting support, when delivered with empathy rather than blame, can help interrupt cycles of verbal abuse.

Audience contributions included perspectives from educators, child development advocates, and parents with lived experience. A recurring point was the vital role of schools, which can either reinforce or challenge harmful communication patterns depending on their culture, teacher training, and relational practices. Speakers called for clearer governmental guidance on respectful and relational communication across all settings, notably schools.

The Start for Life programme was praised as an encouraging integrated early-years support initiative, though its current reach remains limited. One attendee highlighted that neurodivergent children, particularly those with autism and ADHD, are frequently overlooked in trauma discussions, despite their heightened vulnerability to harmful verbal interactions, and stressed the urgent need to include these groups explicitly in preventive efforts.

Jessica Bondy concluded the session by reiterating that childhood verbal abuse is entirely preventable. She cited positive outcomes from Words Matter's pilot programmes, with participants reporting meaningful shifts in their attitudes, behaviours, and relationships. She called for national investment in awareness, education and early intervention, reaffirming that the harms caused by verbal abuse are real, measurable and preventable.

Closing reflection

Professor Peter Fonagy reminded attendees that children occupy society's most vulnerable position. Their capacity for epistemic trust – their ability to believe, learn and gain confidence from adults – depends entirely on how adults communicate with them. Words, he emphasised, either build this trust or destroy it. In the closing discussion, attendees unanimously supported a national response grounded in scientific evidence, validated by lived experience, and committed to raising a generation of children who feel safe, respected and genuinely listened to.

Recommendations

- **Urgent recognition and monitoring**

Panellists recommended formal recognition of verbal abuse within public health and child safeguarding strategies. This should include embedding clear verbal abuse indicators into safeguarding frameworks and national data collection systems to systematically monitor prevalence and impacts.

- **National awareness and education campaigns**

Speakers advocated for a comprehensive national campaign to educate parents, educators and the wider public about the damaging effects of harmful language and the transformative power of positive communication. Targeted outreach efforts to communities, schools and early-years services were particularly emphasised.

- **Professional training and support**

Parenting programmes emphasising constructive communication and emotional responsiveness were consistently identified as the most effective interventions. Panellists called for broader availability and cultural integration of these evidence-based training programmes.

- **Whole-system, trauma-informed approach**

Professor Hughes highlighted Wales' "All-Society Trauma Framework" as a model of how trauma awareness – including verbal abuse – could be effectively embedded across all sectors of society, including education, healthcare, justice, social services and the public. Panellists proposed this framework as a promising example for potential UK-wide implementation.

- **Positive communication in educational settings**

Panellists and audience members stressed the critical role schools play in either perpetuating or preventing verbal abuse. They recommended clear governmental guidelines promoting respectful, relationship-focused communication within school cultures emphasising kindness, respect and emotional understanding. Concerns were raised about coercive practices in some educational settings and their specific negative impact on neurodivergent children.

- **Start for Life and early years**

Contributors consistently called for greater investment in early-years interventions. They emphasised engaging families from pregnancy onwards and integrating verbal abuse awareness into existing programmes such as Start for Life and Healthy Start.

Conclusion

This inaugural House of Commons discussion on childhood verbal abuse marked an important milestone. Panellists agreed that the current lack of policy recognition represents a significant missed opportunity to prevent lasting harm. The evidence presented was unequivocal: childhood verbal abuse by adults is neither benign nor inevitable - it is biologically embedded, formative and wholly preventable. A coordinated, whole-society approach is urgently needed to ensure that words build rather than undermine the next generation.

Words Matter and its partners urge the Government to prioritise verbal abuse explicitly within forthcoming mental health, safeguarding and education policies, enabling the UK truly to raise the healthiest generation in history and break down barriers to opportunity.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Sharon Hodgson MP, our expert speakers, and all those who contributed to the discussion at the event, together with the academics and the network of individuals and organisations who support Words Matter's mission. We are also grateful to Prathit Singh for his help in writing this report.

About Words Matter

Words Matter is a charity (Registered charity number 1201281) on a mission to improve children's mental and physical health and development by ending verbal abuse by the adults around them. Evidence-based, its activity is focused on research, raising awareness and collaboration with experts, decision makers, other organisations and those with lived experience, to help develop and scale solutions to prevent childhood verbal abuse.

www.wordsmatter.org
