Summary report

Words Matter: Impact and Prevention of Childhood Verbal Abuse in Education

House of Commons discussion on 8 September 2026

words matter
help us end verbal abuse of children

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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.
- Its long-term effects include anxiety, depression, eating disorders, sleep difficulties, substance misuse, self-harm, and suicide.[2]
- It can be as harmful as other forms of abuse – landmark study with 20,000 adults revealed it can be as damaging to adult mental health as physical abuse.[3]
- 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. Bellis MA, Hughes K, Ford K, et al. Comparative relationships between physical and verbal abuse of children, life course mental well-being and trends in exposure: a multi-study secondary analysis of cross-sectional surveys in England and Wales BMJ Open 2025;15: e098412. doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2024-098412.
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.

Key facts Teacher-student research[7]

93%

of students say positive communication from teachers makes them more motivated to come to school.

1in4

students (25%) said they experienced harsh words from teachers.

3in4

(76%) of teachers said building positive relationships with pupils is central to their role.

94%

of students say positive and encouraging teachers help them learn.

- In the UK, 93% of students say positive communication from teachers makes them more motivated to come to school.
- 94% say positive and encouraging teachers help them learn.
- One in four students (25%) said they experienced harsh words from teachers.
- Among these experiences, students reported insults (25%), discouraging or demoralising comments (20%), being called "stupid" (16%), being shouted at (11%), or feeling ignored or dismissed (9%).
- More than four in five young people (84%) agreed that negative communication from teachers makes them feel less motivated to come to school.
- A third of students (34%), rising to 54% of pupils with SEND, said experiences with teachers had contributed to them not wanting to attend school.
- 3 in 4 teachers (76%) said building positive relationships with pupils is central to their role.
- 93% agreed positive teacher-student relationships are key to student success.
- Barriers to maintain positive relationships with students included workload, pupil behaviour, curriculum pressures and school culture.
- The impacts of students hearing harsh language were feeling humiliated (58%), losing confidence (57%), feeling sad (51%), becoming less interested in learning (39%), singled out (39%), feeling anxious (34%), doubting themselves (30%), and depressed (24% - 29% girls and 17% boys).

7. Qualitative research was undertaken at the Institute of Education, UCL during 2024 led by Professor Vivian Hill with Dr Rhea Dosi and Dr Eva Yi Man Chow and included 92 students aged 11 - 16 years and 10 secondary school teachers. Quantitative research among students and teachers was undertaken by Family, Kids & Youth (FK&Y), 1,002 responses were received from children aged 11-18 years between 30.1.26 and 8.2.26. 49% (n=488) were boys and 50% (n=498) were girls (1% prefer not to say). There was good representation across the 11-17 age group and across all UK regions. 628 responses were received from secondary school teachers between 27.11.25 and 23.3.26. 35% (n=219) are male and 64% (n=399) are female (1% prefer not to say). Most teachers who responded were subject teachers (63%).

Executive summary

On 8 September 2026, Words Matter hosted an important expert-led discussion at the House of Commons on the impact and prevention of childhood verbal abuse in education. The discussion represented a critical step in its ongoing mission to end childhood verbal abuse (CVA), which affects 2 in 5 (41%) children and can have long-lasting consequences, damaging a child's sense of self, their future relationships and their ability to function at home, school, work and in social situations.

Chaired by Lord Jim Knight and sponsored by Jess Asato MP, the event brought together more than 80 policymakers, educators, safeguarding professionals, researchers, clinicians and child development and mental health experts. It highlighted why addressing childhood verbal abuse in education must become a central part of the Government's education and safeguarding strategy, particularly as verbal abuse is now specifically referenced in the Department for Education's statutory guidance, *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (KCSIE).

Speakers included:

- **Leora Cruddas CBE** – Founding CEO of the Confederation of School Trusts and Government Advisor.
- **Professor Vivian Hill** – Programme Director of the UCL Institute of Education Doctorate in Child, Adolescent and Educational Psychology.
- **Professor Karen Hughes** – Professor of Public Health, Public Health Wales, Bangor University, and Expert Advisor to WHO.
- **Delyth Lynch** – Director of Safeguarding at Wellington College, Executive Board Member of the Safeguarding and Child Protection Association (SACPA).
- **Pete Wharmby** – Former teacher, autistic and ADHD advocate, and author.
- **Paddy Crump** – Mental health and digital rights campaigner and member of the Words Matter Youth Advisory Board.
- **Jessica Bondy** – Founder, Words Matter.

The discussion explored how the everyday words and interactions of adults in education can shape children's safety, confidence, sense of belonging, engagement, attendance and ability to learn. New Words Matter research with the UCL Institute of Education (IOE) revealed the importance of positive teacher–student communication as a key tool in improving students' experience of school and their mental health and wellbeing, while also highlighting the potential consequences when communication becomes harsh or negative.

A central message from the discussion was that positive relationships between teachers and students are at the heart of education. These relationships are built through everyday interactions and are two-way: teachers have a professional responsibility as adults working with children, but relationships are shaped by both teachers and students and by the wider culture and conditions in which schools operate. Positive relationships support children to feel known, respected and valued, while also enabling teachers to teach effectively and experience greater professional fulfilment.

Speakers emphasised that addressing verbal abuse requires schools and the wider education system to create the conditions in which positive relationships can flourish - including supportive leadership, appropriate training, coherent behaviour and safeguarding approaches, understanding of neurodivergence, manageable pressures on teachers, meaningful listening to children and a culture in which adults can reflect and repair when things go wrong.

The discussion concluded with a clear opportunity to focus on both recognition and prevention, ensuring that the words adults use with children are understood as an important part of safeguarding, school culture and educational success.

Opening remarks from Lord Jim Knight

Lord Jim Knight, a former Minister of State for Schools and Learners with extensive experience across education policy and practice, welcomed guests and the expert panel to Parliament. He noted the strong turnout of attendees from education, safeguarding, children's charities and other sectors, and set out the purpose of the discussion: to raise awareness of the importance of childhood verbal abuse, consider how it can be reduced, and increase positive communication between teachers and children in schools. He formally introduced the panel of experts - Leora Cruddas CBE, Professor Vivian Hill, Professor Karen Hughes, Delyth Lynch, Pete Wharmby and Paddy Crump - before inviting them to contribute to the discussion.

Scene setting and context

Words Matter Founder Jessica Bondy explained that childhood verbal abuse by adults - including blaming, shaming, belittling, and threatening - affects 2 in 5 (41%) children in the UK. Of these, over half experience it weekly and one in 10 every day. Parents, carers, teachers, activity leaders and coaches are the primary sources, and, interestingly, there are no socio-economic and regional differences.[1] Importantly, childhood verbal abuse is not just yelling and screaming. It can be quiet, insidious and subtle, with profound and long-lasting consequences for children's mental health, sense of self, relationships and social and emotional development. It can lead to anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, self-harm, PTSD and suicide.[2]

Childhood verbal abuse is now recognised as the number one form of child maltreatment, yet despite its prevalence and potential harm, it remains largely overlooked in public discussion, services and policy.[2]

Words Matter is the first charity globally to focus solely on ending childhood verbal abuse. Bondy highlighted society's lack of awareness and understanding of the impact of verbal abuse, which means that many adults around children unintentionally use harmful language without being aware of its lasting effects. She referenced extensive research which shows that it can be as damaging as other forms of abuse and described a recent landmark study of more than 20,000 adults which found that childhood verbal abuse can be just as harmful as physical abuse to adult mental health. The study also revealed that while physical abuse has halved due to targeted awareness campaigns and interventions, childhood verbal abuse has almost doubled.[3]

Bondy highlighted the critical role schools and teachers play in shaping children's beliefs in themselves and what they are capable of. She referenced a major new study by Words Matter with UCL's Institute of Education, led by Professor Vivian Hill, which provides important new evidence about the role of teacher–student communication. Involving more than 1,000 students and 600 teachers, alongside in-depth qualitative research, it found that nine in ten students said positive communication from teachers makes them more motivated to come to school and helps them learn. At the same time, one in four students (25%) reported experiencing harsh words from teachers, while more than a third (34%) said experiences with teachers had contributed to them not wanting to attend school - rising to 54% among pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).[7]

Bondy stressed that teachers overwhelmingly recognise the importance of positive relationships, but workload, pupil behaviour, curriculum pressures and school culture can make them difficult to build and sustain. The research found that 76% of teachers ranked building positive relationships with pupils among the three most important aspects of their role, while 93% agreed that positive teacher–student relationships play a key role in student success.

She also noted how harsh language can nevertheless become normalised as part of discipline, behaviour management or motivation, arguing that it is possible to be firm without being harsh. The aim, she stressed, should be prevention: creating the conditions in which adults can communicate positively with children, even when behaviour is challenging or pressures are high.

Bondy pointed to the growing recognition of childhood verbal abuse at policy level. Its explicit inclusion in the Government's statutory guidance, *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (KCSIE) 2026, represents an important step, but there is much more to be done.

She cited that half of all mental ill health starts by the age of 14 and that one in five children aged 8–16 have a probable mental health condition. However, a leading expert in children's mental health, Professor Peter Fonagy, Head of the Division of Psychology & Language Sciences at UCL and Government Advisor, has advised that: "Verbal abuse of children by adults is one of the most significant modifiable causes of life-long mental health disorders. Tackling it gives us a powerful lever to prevent mental health disorders and its enormous cost to both the UK and global economy."

The challenge now, Bondy said, is for society to appreciate the power of words for children, and to embed positive communication in schools as a key element of the Government's focus on improving children's mental health and wellbeing, increasing their sense of belonging, inclusion and attendance in schools. As she stated: "Words matter. They stick. They last a lifetime. They shape who we are and who we become." Small shifts in how adults communicate with children can change lives.

> *It only takes one experience to completely ruin someone's confidence in a classroom."*
> **Student**

She shared two contrasting statements from children in the research study: "When teachers are respectful and patient, it helps me feel safe and more confident in class" and "It only takes one experience to completely ruin someone's confidence in a classroom." She finished with a clear rallying cry to join the movement to end childhood verbal abuse and build children up, rather than knock them down.

Defining the issue: What do we mean by childhood verbal abuse in education?

Professor Karen Hughes described childhood verbal abuse as the use of harsh or derogatory language by an adult towards a child which can produce negative emotions, such as feeling worthless or scared. She explained that childhood verbal abuse can be understood within the framework of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), noting that while much of the research has focused on experiences in the home, verbal abuse can also occur in schools. During the discussion, Hughes also noted that specifically talking about verbal abuse, as opposed to emotional abuse, identifies the action through which the harm is enacted, providing a clearer way of identifying this form of abuse. As she said, "Verbal abuse is the action... the perpetrators are acting verbally."

Professor Vivian Hill emphasised that the verbal interactions that pupils experience in everyday interactions with their teachers have a profound impact on their developing sense of self and their wellbeing. Whilst teachers endeavour to maintain positive verbal interactions with pupils, when these become negative not only do teachers describe feelings of deep regret but the impact on pupils can be far reaching. Her research found that young people described negative, verbal interactions as being shouted at, shamed, humiliated or embarrassed in front of their peers, as well as experiencing sarcasm, patronising tones, and non-verbal interactions. In contrast pupils highlighted the impact

of positive verbal exchanges with teachers as improving their motivation, enhancing their sense of belonging and they particularly highlighted the value and importance of teachers being sensitive to their individual needs and circumstances.

Delyth Lynch, drawing on her experience as a safeguarding leader and her work with schools, similarly described verbal abuse as language that shames, humiliates, belittles or undermines a child. She highlighted that it can be subtle, including through tone, sarcasm, public correction or repeated assumptions about a child's intentions.

Pete Wharmby highlighted the particular importance of recognising belittling and "othering" in criticism, assessment and behaviour management. He also drew attention to the experience of neurodivergent children, who may face unconscious prejudice or have behaviours interpreted negatively, potentially increasing the likelihood of angry or impatient responses from adults.

Wharmby explained that singling out verbal abuse helps to shine a light on this insidious form of abuse and the term provides greater clarity, as 'emotional abuse' can be difficult to define and understand, whereas verbal abuse more clearly identifies the harmful communication involved.

Paddy Crump brought the issue to life through his own experience of growing up with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and the ways in which adults responded to behaviours they did not always understand. He explained that while children can sometimes respond negatively to difference, he looked to teachers to provide a "safe place" within school, and described how his experience of verbal abuse from teachers took place both in private conversations and in front of his class. He recalled being told he was "too sensitive" when raising concerns, being shouted at and accused of "putting words into the teachers' mouths", and, during his A-levels, a teacher commenting in front of the class, "I think we've broken Paddy." He also reflected on the importance of the language children hear as they are growing up and "finding themselves", arguing that they need positive affirmation and support rather than words that undermine them.

The contributions illustrated that childhood verbal abuse is not simply about shouting or losing one's temper. It can be present in everyday words, tone and interactions that demean, intimidate or undermine a child, including during correction, criticism, assessment or behaviour management. It highlighted the need for greater clarity about what constitutes verbal abuse and where the boundary lies between harmful language and professional practice.

Why is it important in education?

Professor Vivian Hill emphasised the importance of school culture and ethos, and how this is often established by the leadership team. The new Words Matter and UCL Institute of Education research found that some teachers described feeling conflicted when their values and attitudes differed from the school culture, and that it was very difficult when their beliefs were at variance with the behavioural policies of the school. They described how the rules, regulations and wider culture of a school can strongly influence young people's experience of school. This in turn affects their self-esteem, learning competence and ability to take risks in learning, as well as ultimately impacting on their attendance and sense of school belonging.[7]

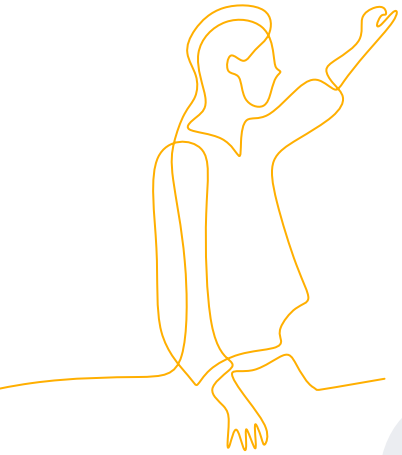
Hill explained that a relational approach within schools can help to mediate negative verbal experiences. Where teachers were careful about their interactions with pupils and avoided shaming, humiliating or embarrassing them, young people described a greater sense of mutual respect. Interactive teaching, where pupils' voices, opinions

and views were taken into account, also helped them to feel more engaged and valued. Where communication was working well, pupils in the research reported feeling more motivated to learn, enjoying learning more and wanting to attend school.[7]

Hill also stressed that teacher–pupil relationships and communication patterns are bi-directional. Teachers are working under significant pressures, including workload, and what are often experienced as competing agendas, for example promoting inclusion and raising standards, alongside zero tolerance behaviour policies. Where teachers work within a school culture that values the importance of relationships, interactions with pupils are experienced more positively, and create a more constructive cycle of interactions in which teachers are more likely to experience professional satisfaction.

> *It makes you feel really fulfilled, knowing that despite the challenges of being a teacher, you've made a significant, positive impact on the children. They mean a lot to me, and I've always kept that in mind."*
> **Teacher**

Leora Cruddas explained the importance of "moving the pupil-teacher relationship from being viewed as primarily a matter of classroom management or pastoral care to being understood as a strategic asset for institutional improvement". She drew on research undertaken by Impact Ed using The Engagement Platform, which emphasised that relationships with teachers are foundational to engagement in school. She described three dimensions of engagement. Emotional engagement is about pupils feeling that they are known, respected and valued; cognitive engagement is about being willing to invest effort and persist with learning; and behavioural engagement is reflected in pupils attending school, participating and behaving more positively.



She also highlighted the relationship between teacher–pupil relationships and attendance, stressing that "teacher relationships predict attendance before attendance becomes a problem." This makes the quality of relationships an important part of understanding and responding to school attendance, rather than something to consider only once attendance has deteriorated.

> *Teacher relationships predict attendance before attendance becomes a problem."*
> **Leora Cruddas**

Cruddas explained that relationships matter because they create a sense of belonging, with teacher relationships directly contributing to whether pupils feel that they matter within the school. This includes adults noticing children, showing that they care about their success, and providing someone to turn to when things go wrong or when an interaction has left them feeling worried, frightened or vulnerable. She described adults as "active creators of a sense of belonging through the everyday interactions they have with children".

This was particularly important for vulnerable pupils, Cruddas advised, while also emphasising that positive teacher relationships are important for all children.

Delyth Lynch emphasised the safeguarding dimension of these everyday interactions, noting that adults' words can either build safety or cause harm. She highlighted that "children remember how adults make them feel", and that this can affect their trust, confidence and ability to learn and thrive in school.

> *Children remember how adults make them feel."*
> **Delyth Lynch**

Panellists reiterated the importance of addressing childhood verbal abuse in education and how this extends beyond individual incidents

or individual relationships. The way adults communicate with children can influence whether pupils feel safe, valued and that they belong, with wider implications for their engagement, learning, attendance, trust, confidence and overall wellbeing.

The impact of childhood verbal abuse in education

Professor Karen Hughes emphasised that childhood verbal abuse can have profound effects on brain development, emotional functioning and wellbeing. She explained that supportive relationships with trusted adults, including warmth, praise and understanding, help children develop trust, confidence and healthy relationship skills. By contrast, abusive language can create stress which, over time, can affect how the brain develops and emotional and physical functioning. "The words that adults direct towards children actually become embedded in how they see themselves and their place within the world" she explained, contributing to low self-esteem and difficulties understanding emotions and relating to others.

> *The words that adults direct towards children actually become embedded in how they see themselves and their place within the world."*
> **Prof Karen Hughes**

Hughes highlighted research linking childhood verbal abuse with problems at school, social isolation, relationship difficulties and poorer physical and mental health, including anxiety, depression and eating disorders. She also emphasised that verbal abuse could have significant effects in its own right, even where it is experienced without other adverse childhood experiences. Research presented at the event found that people who experienced verbal abuse as a single adverse childhood experience still faced substantially increased risks of outcomes including binge drinking, drug use and involvement in violence later in life. Hughes therefore stressed that the effects of childhood verbal abuse can be lifelong, extending into health and wellbeing in adulthood.

Within education, Professor Vivian Hill highlighted how negative verbal interactions can have a significant impact on pupils' development and learning. She noted that evidence suggests that exposure to negative verbal interactions can influence children's attendance, wellbeing, ability to develop trust in adults and ultimately influence their self-esteem and self-confidence. She noted the importance of such findings and cited the UCL Millenium Cohort Studies, which show escalating rates of mental health needs in the child and adolescent population and rising rates of emotionally based school non-attendance. Hill feels that schools can, and must, play a significant role in supporting child mental health and well-being. However, where school cultures are unresponsive to pupil's needs, particularly for those with additional needs or facing challenges in their personal lives, this can contribute to them feeling alienated from education and socially excluded, increasing the risks of them becoming young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs). She referenced the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and described how many schools and teachers are now using this to help children understand their rights and to protect the mental health and well-being of their students.

Delyth Lynch emphasised the safeguarding implications of these experiences. She noted that children experience school through everyday interactions, rather than only through major safeguarding incidents, and that the way adults speak to them can affect their trust, confidence and ability to learn. Where children do not experience adults as safe people to turn to, harmful interactions can undermine the sense of safety that schools should provide.

Pete Wharmby highlighted how verbal abuse from adults around a child who have 'significant power over them' can leave 'deep wounds in their psyche' that last into adulthood. Specifically, among neurodivergent children and young people, Wharmby suggested that the impact of verbal abuse may be disproportionate, while acknowledging that more research is needed to establish this. He spoke about the experience of autistic and ADHD children who may be subjected to repeated corrective criticism or personal attacks because behaviours associated with neurodivergence are misunderstood or viewed negatively. He highlighted behaviours such as repetitive or self-regulating behaviours, including stimming, repeating themselves or talking at length about their special interests, which can be perceived by adults as irritating or annoying, potentially creating a cycle of negative interactions, correction, public correction and criticism. Wharmby linked these experiences to hypervigilance, terror and anxiety.

> *Verbal abuse.....can leave deep wounds in their psyche."*
> **Pete Wharmby**

Paddy Crump provided a powerful account of the immediate and longer-term social and emotional impact of verbal abuse. He described the physical effects of being embarrassed in front of a class, including feeling his face go red and tears welling in his eyes, alongside feeling belittled and unable to use his voice. Reflecting on the experience, he described how, on the "one hand, school was telling him that I needed to be there and succeed, while on the other hand it was "really pushing me away and making me feel really, really small."

> *School was telling me that I needed to be there and telling me I needed to succeed...while really pushing me away."*
> **Paddy Crump**

He emphasised that the context in which words are delivered matters, particularly where comments are made publicly by teachers, whom children should be able to look to as a safe place within school. As he put it, "when you hear these negative comments it really pulls the rug from under your feet". For pupils who may already struggle to interact with their peers, including some neurodivergent pupils, such experiences can be particularly isolating. Crump connected this with his attendance, recalling that his attendance was very low when he was struggling but improved when he encountered teachers who listened to him and responded with empathy. He also described how the effects continued beyond school, including an unconscious nervousness about raising concerns in the workplace which, looking back, he recognised as being connected to his experiences at school.

Jessica Bondy similarly described how negative comments from teachers affected her own educational experience and aspirations. She recalled being told that she was useless at spelling and hopeless at history, experiences which contributed to her giving up subjects in which she might otherwise have succeeded. She also described what she has termed the "Lightning Rod Effect", whereby a negative comment made about a child in front of others can give other children and adults permission to pile in and single that child out, increasing their sense of isolation. Bondy noted that people who have contacted Words Matter, including people now in their 70s and 80s, have described how words spoken to them during childhood continued to negatively and painfully affect their lives to this day.

Taken together, speakers demonstrated that the impact of childhood verbal abuse can operate at several levels. In the short term, it can cause distress, embarrassment, fear, humiliation and isolation, while over time it can affect self-esteem, confidence, relationships, learning, mental and physical health and development. For some children, particularly those who are neurodivergent or already vulnerable, the effects may be

especially profound. The evidence and lived experience presented at the event also highlighted that these effects can persist long after a child has left school, shaping confidence, relationships, health and wellbeing into adulthood.

Why can childhood verbal abuse happen in education?

Professor Vivian Hill highlighted the significant pressures facing teachers within the education system. She described the demands of responding to new guidance, managing heavy workloads and working towards aims that can sometimes appear to be in conflict. Drawing on the Words Matter and UCL Institute of Education research among teachers and students, she noted that teachers described difficulty building quality relationships with pupils while also navigating different government agendas – "supporting child mental health versus raising standards".

Hill strongly emphasised the role of school culture and ethos in setting the tone for relationship-building. She highlighted the challenge teachers can face in maintaining their own values and relational approaches within a climate that operates under a different, dominant discourse.

When teachers moved into a new school, some found it difficult to maintain their own values and relational approach where the prevailing school culture encouraged a different style of interaction. Over time, they could begin to adopt the language and practices of the wider school culture, including ways of communicating that did not reflect how they would otherwise want to work with children.

Teachers also reported that, when under considerable pressure, they may say something they later regretted, with some describing a strong sense of remorse after saying something harsh to a child. They also identified pressures arising from pupils' behaviour and attitudes towards them, alongside a lack of time to build quality relationships with pupils.

Leora Cruddas pointed to the role of school leadership and culture in creating the conditions in which teachers and pupils can flourish. She argued that leaders have an important role in enabling adults to sustain positive relationships with children, and that staff flourishing and pupil flourishing are closely connected. She also stressed that firm expectations and behaviour policies do not necessarily have to conflict with relationship-building. The issue is therefore not the existence of boundaries or high expectations, but how these are implemented and communicated to children.

Delyth Lynch emphasised that harmful interactions can arise unintentionally. Drawing on her experience as a teacher and safeguarding leader, she noted that teachers do not generally go into school intending to upset a child, but that pressure, stress and fatigue can contribute to comments that are later regretted. She highlighted the importance of creating a culture in which adults feel able to recognise when they have caused harm, reflect on their actions and take responsibility for repairing the relationship.

Lynch also highlighted the role of wider school culture in normalising harmful language. Where negative language is repeated, it can become accepted as part of the way things are done within an organisation. She stressed the importance of looking beyond a child's presenting behaviour and asking what may be happening for them, rather than responding immediately with language that shames, demoralises or undermines them. In this sense, the way adults understand and interpret children's behaviour can itself influence how they respond.

Pete Wharmby stressed that pressures in the teaching profession can contribute to the conditions in which verbal abuse occurs. He specifically addressed the problem of

"compassion fatigue", explaining that pressure, stress, exhaustion and overwork can reduce a person's capacity to express basic empathy and compassion. He noted that the medical profession is already more proactive in recognising and addressing compassion fatigue, whereas there is less awareness of it within education. Wharmby argued that this is particularly significant in schools, where teachers may be highly compassionate professionals but can, under sustained pressure, reach a point where they have little emotional capacity left. He suggested that compassion fatigue could help explain some of the unintentional instances of verbal abuse in schools, and that greater awareness of the issue and appropriate support for teachers should form part of the response.

Panellists suggested that childhood verbal abuse in education cannot be understood solely as the result of individual behaviour or intent. The panel identified a combination of pressures and conditions, including workload, stress and fatigue, competing professional demands, school culture, behaviour policies, limited time for relationships and the ways in which children's behaviour and needs are interpreted. Preventing harmful communication therefore requires attention not only to individual conduct, but also to the wider conditions in which teachers and pupils interact.

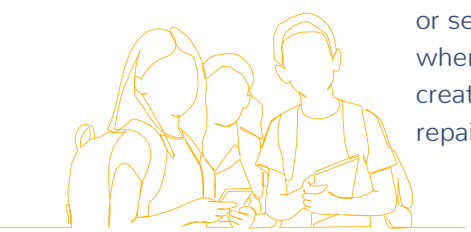
Recognition and prevention of childhood verbal abuse in education

Professor Vivian Hill explained that, historically, verbal abuse has largely been categorised under the broader term 'emotional abuse'. She argued that this has meant the issue has not received the attention it warrants and that establishing a clearer definition of childhood verbal abuse, in its own right is an important step towards addressing it. Hill also highlighted the extent to which sometimes cultures of communication can normalise harsh or negative language, particularly where such language is subsequently defused or dismissed as banter or an attempt at humour. She argued that the treatment of children should be informed by both recent developments in neuroscience and by the evidence we now have of how children experience verbal abuse.

Hill also emphasised the importance of greater coherence between legislation, Government guidance and practice in schools. Drawing on the Words Matter and UCL IOE research with children and young people, she highlighted the importance they placed on adults listening to them, recognising when they are trying and creating environments where they feel safe. The research suggested that where communication and relationships were positive, pupils felt more motivated to learn, enjoyed learning more and were more likely to want to attend school. She highlighted "we all know that if we're going to learn effectively, we have to be able to make mistakes and feel confident to do that without any risk of humiliation." She drew attention to the relevance of children's rights, noting that frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child underline the responsibilities of adults working with children.

> *We all know that if we're going to learn effectively, we have to be able to make mistakes and feel confident to do that without any sense of humiliation."*
> **Prof Vivian Hill**

Delyth Lynch emphasised the importance of ensuring that both children and adults understand what constitutes healthy and respectful communication. Children should be supported to recognise when an interaction is harmful and to feel able to challenge it or seek help. At the same time, adults need the knowledge and support to recognise when their own communication has caused harm. Lynch highlighted the importance of creating school cultures in which staff can acknowledge mistakes, take responsibility and repair relationships, rather than allowing harmful interactions to become normalised.



Lynch also highlighted the need to recognise verbal abuse as a safeguarding issue rather than treating harmful interactions simply as matters of behaviour or discipline. She emphasised that children experience school through everyday interactions, and that the absence of a visible injury does not mean that harm has not occurred. She drew on Wellington College's experience of working with Words Matter over the previous 12 months on its schools pilot programme. She explained that the work had highlighted how pupils experience harmful communication in everyday school interactions, including shaming, humiliation, belittling, undermining, sarcasm and public correction. She emphasised that everyday interactions with adults can either build safety or cause harm, and that both teachers and students had started to recognise this. She explained that "the aim is to provide a culture within schools where all children are treated with dignity and kindness."

Pete Wharmby identified the need for "a clearer clarification of the boundaries... of where we should draw a line" around language used with children, alongside training that equips teachers and school staff to recognise and prevent harmful communication. He particularly emphasised the need for greater understanding of neurodivergence within education. This includes recognising how unconscious assumptions about behaviour can contribute to repeated criticism, correction or negative interactions with neurodivergent children.

> *A clearer clarification of the boundaries... of where we should draw a line here is something that's really crucial."*
> **Pete Wharmby**

Paddy Crump stressed the importance of ensuring that young people themselves understand what childhood verbal abuse is and are able to recognise when an interaction is harmful. He advocated for stronger avenues through which children can raise concerns and access support, so that they have trusted people to turn to when difficulties arise. His contribution reinforced the importance of giving children a meaningful voice in identifying and addressing harmful experiences within school.

Professor Karen Hughes argued that greater awareness is needed beyond schools themselves. She advocated for wider awareness of the impact of childhood verbal abuse among adults and children across homes, communities and schools, supporting a broader shift towards more positive, tolerant and considerate communication with children.

> *When teachers are respectful and patient, it helps me feel safe and more confident in class."*
> **Student**

Jessica Bondy highlighted the importance of establishing a shared definition of childhood verbal abuse, to help its prevention, given how it can be unintentional. She proposed that training about verbal abuse and its prevention, with a focus on what to say as opposed to just what not to say, should be made available for adults working with children at every stage of development to ensure the language they use and style of communication is appropriate.

Bondy shared research undertaken with over 1,000 children which revealed the five most helpful words and phrases that parents, carers and teachers should be aware of. These are 'I am proud of you,' 'You can do it,' 'I believe in you,' 'I'm here for you,' and 'It's OK to make mistakes, you can learn from them.' Bondy advocated for the recognition of verbal abuse in the statutory *Early Years Framework*, in the same way it has now been included in *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (KCSIE) 2026. She also called for more targeted support for students and teachers, as well as support for

parents and carers during pregnancy to promote practical, healthy communication from the very start of a child's life.

The discussion also touched briefly on the concept of 'childism', raised in response to a question from the floor. While this was not explored in detail, the discussion raised broader questions about how children's voices, experiences and rights are valued within wider systems and society.

> *If they paid attention to individuals rather than assuming everyone is on the exact same level."*
> **Student**

Closing remarks

In her closing remarks, Jessica Bondy reminded attendees of the crucial role adults play in children's mental health and wellbeing. She emphasised key areas for consideration. That adults are role models for children, and if we respect them, they will not only respect themselves, but others. The need to set expectations that are realistic, clear and appropriate to a child's age and stage of development as children do well if they can. Focussing on the positives when communicating with children and help them feel safe and valued. The value of taking a step back when things get overloaded, stopping, and thinking before speaking. Finally, she stressed the importance for adults to repair relationships, recognise when they may have said something hurtful and put things right by apologising.

> *Prioritise connection before correction and curiosity before judgement."*
> **Jessica Bondy**

Her central message was that adults should prioritise "connection before correction, curiosity before judgement, and focus on building children up, not knocking them down."

> *"Every child should feel safe, valued, respected and like they belong at school. These findings provide a timely reminder that words can have a lasting impact on young people's lives. Having spent many years working in education, I know just how much teachers care about their relationships with students - and how hard they work to build them, often in very challenging circumstances. This research shows that when teachers get the support and space to communicate positively, everyone benefits. I urge decision makers to take these research findings seriously."*
>
> **Lord Jim Knight**

Recommendations

1. Explicitly recognise childhood verbal abuse within education and safeguarding policy

Childhood verbal abuse should be clearly recognised within relevant education and safeguarding policy and guidance, with a shared definition that helps schools, professionals and children understand what harmful communication can look like. This should include subtle forms such as humiliation, belittling, sarcasm and shaming, while distinguishing harmful interactions from legitimate correction, challenge and behaviour management.

2. Make positive teacher–pupil relationships a strategic priority for school improvement

Positive teacher–pupil relationships should be recognised as central to school improvement, rather than viewed primarily as a matter of pastoral care. Relationships influence pupils' sense of belonging, engagement, learning and attendance, and can provide an important early indication of disengagement before attendance becomes a visible problem.

School improvement and attendance strategies should therefore consider the quality of relationships between adults and pupils as part of the conditions that enable children to feel safe, valued and able to engage in education.

3. Create school cultures where expectations and positive relationships reinforce one another

Schools should develop cultures in which clear boundaries, expectations and effective behaviour management are compatible with dignity, respect, listening and positive relationships. The aim should be to ensure that correction and challenge are communicated in ways that do not shame, humiliate or undermine children.

Leadership has an important role in creating these conditions, including establishing cultures in which adults can reflect on their practice, acknowledge when communication has caused harm and repair relationships when things go wrong.

4. Support teachers to build and sustain positive relationships

The conditions that can make positive relational practice difficult to sustain should be addressed, including workload, behaviour pressures, competing demands and limited time to build relationships with pupils.

Teachers should be supported around for the pressures they face. Supporting staff wellbeing and professional flourishing is closely connected to supporting pupils to flourish, and schools need the capacity and structures that enable teachers to sustain positive relationships while maintaining appropriate boundaries and expectations.

5. Strengthen professional development on communication, relational practice and neurodivergence

Teachers and other school staff should have access to practical training and professional development that helps them recognise childhood verbal abuse, understand its impact and develop positive approaches to communication, emotional regulation and behaviour management.

This should include greater understanding of neurodivergence and unconscious bias, helping staff recognise how assumptions about children's behaviour or needs can contribute to repeated criticism, correction or negative interactions.
Training should focus not only on what adults should avoid saying, but also on the positive communication that helps children feel safe, valued and able to learn.

6. Put children's voices at the centre of prevention, recognition and repair

Children and young people should have meaningful opportunities to contribute to and evaluate school culture, relationships and approaches to behaviour, alongside accessible and trusted routes to raise concerns about harmful interactions and access support.

Children's experiences should also inform how schools understand whether relationships and communication are working effectively, and children should have confidence that concerns will be listened to and acted upon. Where harm has occurred, schools should support appropriate opportunities for acknowledgement, apology and repair.

7. Create national awareness campaign

There should be a national awareness campaign to increase understanding of childhood verbal abuse and the impact of adults' words among parents, carers, educators and other adults who work with or care for children. This should promote positive, tolerant and considerate communication with children, and consider how existing education, early-years, family-support and public-health approaches can incorporate evidence-informed messages about positive communication and the potential impact of harmful language.

Conclusion

The House of Commons discussion demonstrated that addressing verbal abuse in schools is not simply about identifying harmful words. It is about creating the conditions in which positive relationships can flourish. Teacher–pupil relationships are central to whether children feel safe, valued and that they belong, with wider implications for their mental health, engagement, attendance, learning and their ability to thrive.

Within education, this means creating coherent frameworks in which positive relationships, clear expectations, effective behaviour management are mutually reinforcing. It also means ensuring that teachers are supported to build and sustain these relationships, that children and young people are listened to, and that schools have the confidence and structures to recognise and repair harm when communication goes wrong.

The evidence and lived experience presented at the event reinforce that positive communication is not an optional addition to educational practice. It is part of creating safe, inclusive and effective schools. Words Matter urges the Government to prioritise childhood verbal abuse within mental health, safeguarding and education policies, enabling the UK to raise the healthiest generation in history and break down barriers to opportunity.

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About Words Matter www.wordsmatter.org

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.

Two free resources:

- A free evidence-based online course: Words Matter: How to Communicate with Children so they Thrive, available on FutureLearn.com
- A downloadable guide – A practical guide to communicating with children in any classroom which provides guidance for 12 real classroom scenarios, from homework issues and exam anxiety to de-escalation and giving feedback without shame. Available free at www.wordsmatter.org