

# What Mental Health Professionals Need to Know about Childhood Verbal Abuse: Findings from a Systematic Review

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# Acknowledgment

1. Study commissioned by Words Matter Charity, UK
2. Collaboration with University College London, Prof. Peter Fonagy and team

Dube SR, Li ET, Fiorini G, Lin C, Singh N, Khamisa K, McGowan J, Fonagy P. Childhood verbal abuse as a child maltreatment subtype: A systematic review of the current evidence. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2023 Oct;144:106394. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106394. Epub 2023 Aug 14. PMID: 37586139.





# Objectives

1. Describe the burden of childhood verbal abuse in the population.
2. Explain the various terms and definitions used for assessing childhood verbal abuse in research and practice.
3. Discuss how research informs the need for childhood verbal abuse to be a category of child maltreatment.

# Background

- ▶ Child maltreatment subtypes<sup>1-4</sup>
  - physical abuse
  - sexual abuse
  - emotional abuse
  - neglect
- ▶ Of the four, **emotional abuse is the least studied and most prevalent form**<sup>5</sup>



1. Christoffersen et al., 2013
2. Teicher et al., 2016
3. Warmingham et al., 2019
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/fastfact.html>
5. Lang et al., 2020

# Evidence of Epidemiologic Shifts in Abuse

Forms of Childhood Abuse Prevalence, 2017 - 2023

Authors	Childhood Emotional Abuse	Childhood Physical Abuse	Childhood Sexual Abuse
Global World Health Organization	36%	22%	25%
UK Adults Bellis et al, 2023	21%	16%	7%
US Adults Merrick et al, 2018	34%	18%	12%
US Adolescents Krause et al., 2022	55%	11%	-----

Plausible explanations:

- 1) Emotional abuse is often under-recognized and under-addressed
- 2) Emotional abuse may be serving as an “alternate” outlet to physical abuse
- 3) Various ways in which emotional abuse is termed, defined, and measured
- 4) **Childhood verbal abuse** as a maltreatment subtype has not received adequate attention and is subsumed within other terms

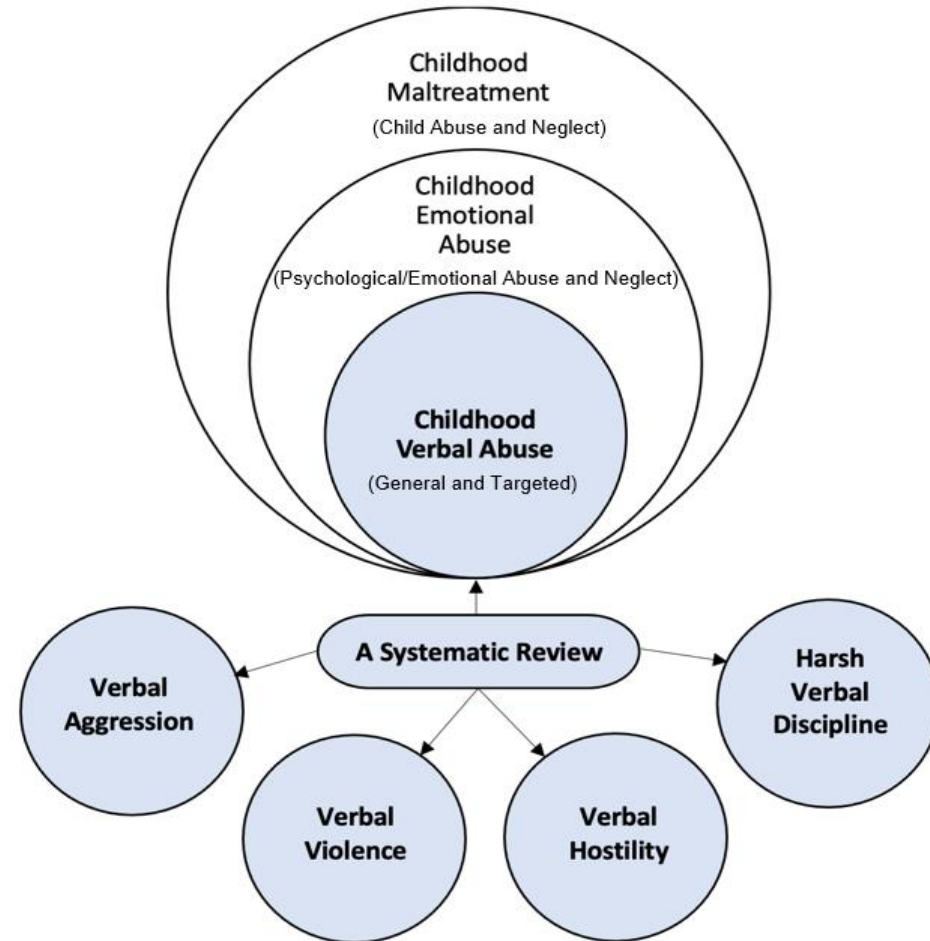
childhood emotional abuse  
childhood emotional violence  
childhood emotional maltreatment  
childhood psychological abuse  
childhood psychological maltreatment.

# Gaps and Research Questions

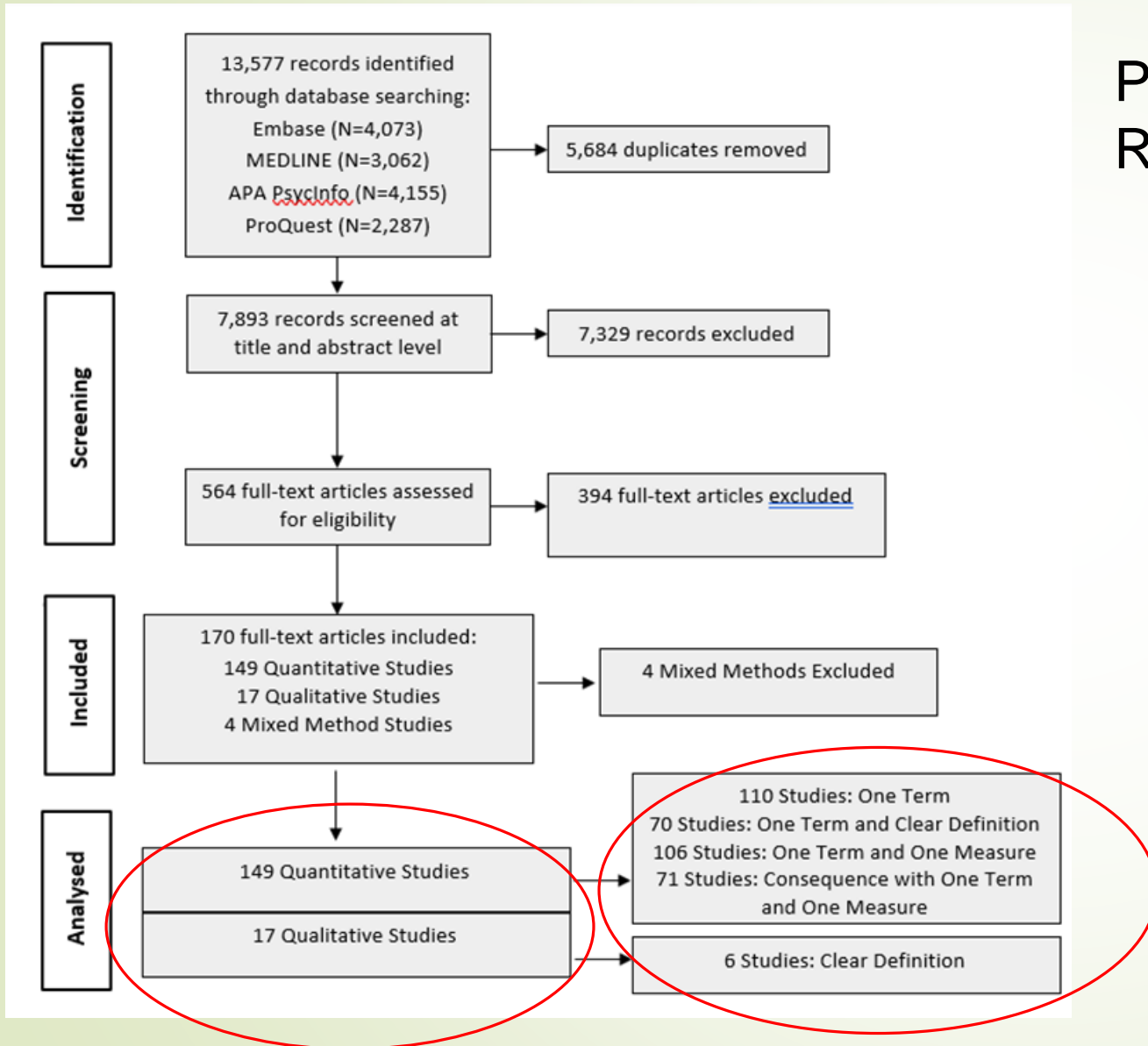
Lack of uniformity in the definition and terms of childhood verbal abuse.

Two research questions that informed the systematic review:

- 1) What are the common terms, associated definitions, and measures used to assess childhood verbal abuse as a form of maltreatment
- 2) What are the long-term outcomes associated with childhood verbal abuse?



# Systematic Review Methods Briefly



## Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA)

- Comprehensive review
- Massive volume of studies
- Over 160 studies were included
- Most reviews have focused on emotional or psychological abuse
- First to focus on childhood verbal abuse

# RESULTS



## Top terms used alone or in conjunction with other terms

Term	Frequency Count*	Percent (%)*
<b>Verbal abuse</b>	98	65.8
<b>Verbal aggression</b>	41	27.5
<b>Verbal hostility</b>	11	7.4
<b>Emotional abuse (only with other terms)</b>	9	6.0
<b>Verbal violence</b>	8	5.3
<b>Harsh verbal discipline</b>	3	2.0
<b>Verbal assault</b>	3	2.0
<b>Other Terms Used (frequency is ≤ 2)</b>		
<b>Verbal domestic violence</b>	Psychological abuse	Parental punitiveness
<b>Verbal attack</b>	Psychological	Weight-related teasing
<b>Verbal punishment</b>	aggression	Abusive language
<b>Verbal emotional abuse</b>	Psychological	Spurning
<b>Verbal offence</b>	punishment	Threat
	Psychological violence	Hostility

# Definitions of Childhood Verbal Abuse and Immediate Impact on Children and Adolescents

## SPEECH BEHAVIORS

### PARENT, STEP-PARENT, MOTHER

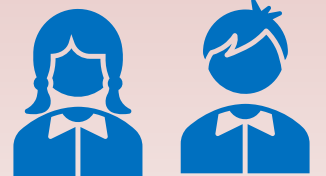
- Tone through yelling and screaming
- Criticizing words
- Threatening words
- Name-calling
- Ridiculing words
- Insulted and humiliated
- Words of blame, shame
- Verbal put-downs
- Swearing at child
- Murdering, witheringly, contemptuous remarks

### TEACHERS, COACHES

- Criticizing words
- Ridiculing words
- Scolding words
- Negative comparisons
- Picked on
- Verbal putdowns
- Verbal put-downs
- Swearing at child
- Threatening words

## Immediate Impact of Words on Children and Adolescents

Loss of feeling loved  
Feeling hated  
Feeling rejected  
Feeling emotionally harmed  
Feeling overpowered and controlled

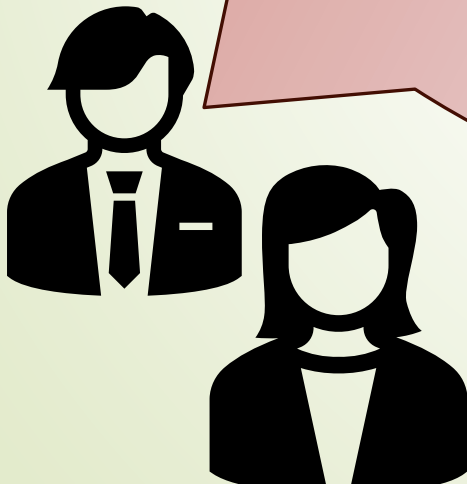


## ADULTS

Parent, step-parent, mother, caregiver

Teachers

Coaches



# Long-term Consequences Across the Lifespan

## Childhood Verbal Abuse Outcomes:

- Childhood & Adolescence:  
Anger, depression, frustration, suicidality, revenge-seeking; conduct disorders; academic difficulties, low self-control; low self-esteem
- Young Adults:  
Depression, emotional problems, mental health problems; alcohol use; IPV; anatomical changes in brain; psychopathology
- Adults/Older Adults:  
Mental illness, Psychiatric disorders; Substance disorders, sex offenses, smoking; physical health problems: COPD, obesity, HIV risk

# Limitations

- 1) Some published studies may not have been included.
- 2) Did not take into consideration cultural or country-specific contexts.
- 3) Risk factors not examined.
- 4) Did not include peer-to-peer or relational verbal abuse.

A special issue underway in Child Protection and Practice Journal.  
Guest Editors: Dr. Shanta Dube and Dr. Xiangming Fang



# Discussion

Study Findings indicated:

- 1) There appears to be an epidemiological shift in childhood abuse exposures, with a high burden of CVA globally.
- 2) The terminology reviewed suggests that **childhood verbal abuse** is a more appropriate and all-encompassing term.
- 3) Abusive speech behaviors of adults to children include screaming, shouting, criticism, and denigrating words from parents and other adults.
- 4) The immediate impact upon hearing harsh words leads to a toxic stress response in children.
- 5) Bottling up the abusive words experienced can lead to lifelong adverse behavioral and health outcomes



# Summary and Recommendations

- Childhood verbal abuse puts the focus on the adults compared to childhood emotional abuse, which puts more focus on the victim.
- The current focus on emotional abuse, which renders secondary and tertiary prevention among those who have suffered from verbal abuse.
- Childhood verbal abuse focuses on the adults and offers more opportunities for helping adults with their unresolved trauma
- By getting childhood verbal abuse on the radar of detection, we can address primary and secondary prevention rather than tertiary prevention of childhood emotional abuse.

**For mental health providers:**

**Childhood verbal abuse is a hidden, yet pervasive exposure that has an immediate impact on children's self-worth, and self-concept, with negative lifelong impact across the lifespan.**



Thank you!!

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