

## VERBAL ABUSE AND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT IN LYAMUTUNDWE VILLAGE, WAKISO DISTRICT-UGANDA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY.

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### ABSTRACT

#### Background

The community of Lyamutundwe village in Wakiso District, Uganda, engages in constant interactions between adults and children. There are abusive practices by child caretakers that go unreported and those include the use of child verbal abuse. Considering the education status of many residents of Lyamutundwe, one would assume that matters of safeguarding children from the effects of verbal abuse would be abated by highlighting their existence and addressing them. This, however, is not the case. This observation engendered a study that aimed at investigating the beliefs of caregivers about verbal abuse and how it affects children's growth and development. The main questions were: What beliefs do caregivers hold as they interact with children? What caused adults to use abusive words to children? What could be done to abate the effects of child verbal abuse?

#### Methodology

The dominantly qualitative study, which was of exploratory study design, used the open-ended methods: oral interviews, participatory observations, and focus group discussions. These elicited data from the respondents that highlighted the beliefs about abusive words and perceptions of their impact on children's self-esteem and development.

#### Discussion

The study discovered that depending on their beliefs about the impact of verbal abuse on children, caregivers behave differently. Those respondents who considered verbal abuse useful maintained its use while disciplining children; those who considered it destructive, because it humiliated and demoralized children, reported that they avoided it. Overall, it was observed that discouraging, blaming children, and making jokes about them were expressions of verbal abuse that negatively impacted children's development. The study recommended that young parents in Lyamutundwe be inducted into parental roles and made aware of the dangers of child verbal abuse. The findings and recommendations could be generalized to young families in Wakiso District, and largely to Uganda and globally world over.

**Keywords:** Verbal Abuse, Growth, Development, Abusive Anger, Nicknames, Making Jokes.

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#### Background of the Study

At the time of the study, the researcher was a resident of Lyamutundwe village who observed that several parents, teachers, and other adults who served as providers of childcare freely used verbal abuse and did not consider the effect they had on children's self-image. Her studies in safeguarding unraveled to her the impact of verbal abuse and the need to be sensitive when selecting words to use when communicating with children. The observations were the reason to explore the impact of verbal abuse on children's development.

#### Methodology

##### Exploratory Research Design

The study was exploratory, this is because it aimed at finding out the beliefs that the participants held about verbal

abuse, and how these were practically expressed in their relationships with the children under their care. The study predominantly employed qualitative methods of data collection namely, observations and interviews.

The qualitative research design helped the researcher to examine and describe the cause and effect of verbal abuse on children's development, by observing the language both visual and nonverbal, and interpreting different people's experiences that were not written in the questionnaires. For example, the researcher got some learners in face-to-face interviews to draw details about the causes of verbal abuse on children through sharing their personal experiences.

##### Study Setting

Lyamutundwe village in the Katabi sub-county is far from being a traditional Ugandan village. It was properly built with fenced houses of modern architecture. Most of its

residents could be described as members of an educated class that engages in office or clerical work in non-government organizations, counseling centers, religious institutions, and schools. From the outside one could assume that the quality of conduct towards children was highly skilled. Additionally, the residents got many opportunities to reflect on parental skills and awaken the negative effects of verbal abuse on children. Nevertheless, observations revealed that many adults in Lyamutundwe engaged in verbal abuse against their children: they used words to address various situations of their relationships with children. It pointed to beliefs that were attached to the use of abusive words. Those beliefs behind the use of verbal abuse to children had not been explored in a scientific study. They comprised the general rationale for the research that engendered this publication.

### Empirical (Field) Research

The empirical research which is the basis of this publication lasted three months, namely from the beginning of June to the last week of August 2022. During this period the researcher visited 12 households and 4 schools in the Lyamutundwe village, she interviewed their head teachers; she also held oral interviews with teachers and children. She investigated 87 participants; these were 57 adults and 30 children who filled out the open-ended questionnaires and participated in oral interviews.

47 adults filled out the open-ended questionnaires, and 12 respondents participated in the oral interviews: 7 adults and 5 children, among the adults were head teachers, teachers, businessmen, and women.

One focus group discussion that comprised 7 adults met for 3 hours and discussed various themes about verbal child abuse. The researcher also did participant observations in the schools.

The following was the procedure for the participant observations in the schools: After the head teachers gave the researcher permission to carry out the study observations and oral interviews, she went to each of the four schools to directly observe the way the teachers talked to the children and how the children played and spoke to one another. She wrote rough notes in her research diary which she later edited and saved. She recorded the oral interviews and wrote rough notes which she later transcribed and edited into fair copies.

With interviews and focus group discussions, the participants gave their opinions and perspectives about the beliefs and reasons for verbal child abuse. The researcher acted as a moderator who, with their consent, summarized and noted down their thoughts and responses for the final report.

### Ethical Considerations

This study was categorized as sensitive because it investigated personal relationships that could be intimate such as between parents and their children, teachers and their learners, housemaids and children, siblings and learners among themselves. To an extent, it is difficult for participants to say the whole truth about how they relate,

because of feelings of shame and embarrassment, particularly in incidents where adults applied verbal abuse to children and demoralized them.

Secondly, those relationships were characterized by the power that caregivers immensely wielded over the children. The adults included teachers, housemaids, parents, religious leaders, leaders of Local Councils, and others. The researcher had to see to it that the study did not cause any violence in their relations due to the responses given. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher tried to protect the privacy of the respondents, both adults and children. Children could easily be punished for revealing secrets of negative treatment by their adult caregivers. In collecting the data, the researcher made sure she observed confidentiality since this topic of study could lead to reprisals in the community.

She allowed the respondents to either indicate their names or not. She continued to make sure that only the respondents who were willing to respond to the questionnaires did it because it was voluntary. And, in this regard, she respected every respondent, especially by thanking them for their honest responses. She made sure she collected the questionnaires on time as planned as a way of being punctual and exact which is also a sign of respect. She worked hand in hand with her supervisor with the utmost respect and together made sure the dignity of the respondents was protected.

### RESULTS

The researcher observed that in Lyamutundwe, some parents and caregivers verbally abused children using their words. Instead of speaking kind words, they shouted at the children with words that *beat the children to the heart like a stick*. Verbal abuse destroys self-esteem in children and thus interrupts their social interactions. This is in agreement with Riggs (2010) who wrote, 'abusive expressions demoralize children because they assault, dominate, ridicule, manipulate, and degrade the children and negatively impact their psychological health'.

The study revealed that verbal abuse was closely connected to emotional abuse of children and it was realized that speaking harshly to the children was worse than beating them (Collin, 2000). Oral interviews and focus group discussions substantiated this point, as some members pointed out during the discussion. Starting with beliefs, the results of the study were grouped following the research questions: *What beliefs do caregivers hold as they interact with children? Why do people verbally abuse children? What could be done to abate the effects of child verbal abuse?*

### Beliefs

Some respondents expressed a belief that the use of drugs by some caretakers of Lyamutundwe contributed to the use of abusive words to children. 'After taking drugs some people forgot that it was virtuous to speak appropriately. Drugs made people violent so that even what they said was ignored irrespective of their state of life whether under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

During oral interviews, twelve respondents, using various expressions stated their beliefs about the power of words. One stated, *'Many parents ignore the power of words, the fact is that the words we use have power.* This was demonstrated in the parents' habitual blessings to their children- they believed that children would be blessed. Others gave their children names that opened them to success, joy, or happiness. Examples of such names included: 'Mirembe' which in the Luganda language means Peace'- it is a positive way of using a name to appreciate peace in the owner of the name. Other examples include: 'Mulungi' to means that 'God is good to them' and thus they are always blessed; 'Kwagala' means 'Love', among others. In addition to the choice of abusive words, the respondents agreed that the tone of the voice carried the intended message to a child that is seen to be unruly, as one interviewee (a parent stated) *'so if a mother is gentle with the children, they may not listen, so they raise their voices and shout, others yell at children to show control over them.* Many argued that *'children of these days are stubborn'*.

The findings from the field research were supported by substantial literature which confirmed that child verbal abuse by caregivers encompasses such actions as discouraging, blaming, and making jokes that negatively impact children. Likewise, several authors agree that child verbal abuse destroys self-confidence in children, causes them to socially withdraw, and, to have low self-esteem (Roth, 2004).

### Reasons

Through an oral interview and with members of a focus discussion group, the researcher confirmed that some people use verbal abuse because they are stressed and angered. Thus, one's state of mind could explain an outburst to a child that comes up as an abusive word or expression. There was consensus in the discussion group when they confirmed that some caretakers express their anger to children as revenge for what happened to them. This was supported by oral interviewees, for example, one mother said, *'Yes, because some guardians are stressed, they tend to throw it to children by speaking bitter words to them, transferring their annoyance to innocent children'*.

Several respondents confirmed that *'yes, some people transferred their annoyance and aggression to an innocent child'* *'Yes, I agree because it was very difficult for a stressed person to calm down his or her emotions'* says one respondent, and that, stress and anger could lead to verbal abuse, especially to single mothers whose husbands can't care for the children in violent homes whereby the parents are not in good terms, they are angry stressed over many things'.

A head teacher in oral interviews explained, *'some caretakers in their childhood were subjected to verbal abuse which led to normalizing verbal abuse and considering it as part of life. This is true of some of my teachers who express their frustrations at children and do not express any sense of remorse. This connects verbal abuse to states of mental health.*

Members of the discussion group also observed that *'Some caretakers who were verbally abusive had mild mental disorders which included frustration, stress, and excessive anger, thus the percentage of abusers with mild mental disorders is higher than those who have a healthy state of mind'*. They also confirmed that a *'verbal abuser may not be aware of the consequences of their words, also because they could be sustaining a brain injury due to suffering a stroke. These could be the cause for looming anger, aggression, or violence also at a slight provocation'*.

Members of the focus discussion group also observed that carers' past experiences contribute to habitual verbal abuse of children. *'Because they were abused as children several men and women unconsciously turn off their ability to feel emotional pain for children and so make verbal abuse part of their daily activity'*. Many of these abusers have no idea that they are practicing verbal abuse.

Ignorance about verbal abuse: A respondent, in an interview, was quoted as: *'Many caregivers in Lyamutundwe take verbal abuse so lightly that when one comes up to discourage such verbal abuse, the abuser does not comprehend what you are discouraging'*.

Findings indicate that children lack confidence in life; lose self-drive character and self-esteem; school dropouts and others can be forced to go to the streets; poor academic performance in class; children hate teachers and subjects; torture of the mind affecting a child's thinking/ mental abilities and bring trauma. The child can also develop that habit of verbal abuse as a daily language; children's rights will be violated, and they will be seriously affected, which can lead to neurological disabilities. Verbal abuse creates fear in the child makes them aggressive; and brings about changes in the moods especially at home due to domestic anxiety and stress and thus forces the children to join bad groups. Social withdrawal and isolation were inevitable with verbal abuse because feelings of shame, guilt, and hopelessness become part of a child who is verbally abused all the time. Beyond that, the children feel low self-confidence, and low self-esteem, worry so much, fear sharing what's happening, a child start failing class work because they fear asking questions in class, bullying sets in, children hate teachers, parents, and school staff, hate subjects among others. Much as adults are affected by verbal abuse, children too respond *"to verbal abuse with confusion, doubts, fear, guilt, worry, inhibition, anger, emotional, behavioral, mental dependence upon the abuser, physical ailments, loneliness, depression, and sorrow"* (Dryburgh. A. 2022).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The study revealed that people's beliefs about verbal abuse impacted their performance. That is to say, those who believed that child verbal abuse is acceptable, freely applied it. Those who believed that it was destructive consciously avoided the use of it to save children's dignity and mental health.

We could interpret certain attitudes as expressions of ignorance, particularly among those who freely apply it considering it as a positive practice. For such people, there

is a need for training and advocacy for 'safeguarding practices that include an understanding of the power of words. Child caretakers need to understand the privileged positions they occupy and how impactful their words can be. The courses should emphasize safeguarding children from practices of verbal abuse, as from all situations that stunt children's holistic growth and their full expression of life.

Thus, parents, teachers, families of young couples, and other caregivers need to be taught about managing their children as unique individuals because they develop at different stages of life as confirmed by psycho-social theory. Erik Erickson's 8 stages of Psycho-social development theory suggests that people's ego identity develops throughout their entire life during the 8 stages as a function of negotiating their biological and sociocultural development. Erik Erickson's theory emphasizes the importance of the social setting towards children's development. Parents and caretakers should endeavor to provide a peaceful environment with enriching words for children's growth and development and avoid domestic violence and the transfer of anger and stress to innocent children.

The researcher directed the introduction of guidance and counseling sessions to children, ensuring that guardians/parents show a good example to the children as important steps in the protection of children from verbal abuse. During the research work, a respondent said as one measure: *'Appreciate the children whenever they do something. Give reinforcement for motivation. Another one said, 'I would suggest positive parenting, counseling and guidance.*

The researcher recommended peer-to-peer support, sensitization of parents and adults about verbal abuse, and talking to adults and children about the effects of being verbally abused, appreciating children for who they are, rather than applying verbal abuse which hurt the life of a person.

Treating each child as unique and avoiding comparing children was another recommendation. *'It is a bad practice to compare children because children should be loved the way they are' (Stated by the majority of child participants).* The children should be taught social values that include: respect for other people, obedience, discipline, and faith. This could come true through continuous counseling and sensitization of both parents and children about abusive language and its effects.

Promotion of human rights and children's rights through teaching them their responsibilities and duties should be done in homes so that no one is forced into yelling or shouting at irresponsible children. In other words, children's rights must be considered when sensitizing people-preaching to the children the gospel of love for one another and guiding them on the right ways to go by being examples, and being role models to the children were recommended. Children's rights should be established in any place or area where children play, learn, and live and the leaders should value the young generation. These places include schools, hospitals, local council meetings, rehabilitation centers, churches, and recreational centers, among others.

Parental guidance should take place. Strict supervision when children are watching the TV to avoid infecting children with negative messages from the media would help a lot in eliminating verbal abuse. The parents and guardians need to be encouraged to speak properly and behave well, forgive the teachers who yell because they have other issues that disturb them, speak well of others and avoid nicknaming, give respect to children with disabilities too, be kind to little children and above all have faith in God for a better life, should be promoted.

## Conclusion

The study recommended that communities should emphasize safeguarding children and vulnerable adults from environments. In brief, the findings reveal that shouting at children impacts children's mental abilities and that most children are verbally abused but many do not even know that they are undergoing abuse. So, a lot of sensitization has to happen and let the public know of the effects of verbal abuse on children. Parents, teachers, and caregivers should handle children as unique individuals because they develop at different stages of life as confirmed by psycho-social theory. Parents and caretakers should endeavor to provide a peaceful environment with enriching words for children's growth and development and avoid domestic violence and the transfer of anger and stress to innocent children.

## Generalization of the Study

The conclusions and recommendations of the study can be generalized to other contexts of human communities, particularly in relationships that engage caregivers and children, and where caregivers are the actual parents. Adults should try to have self-control amidst all their troubles and use polite and acceptable language when correcting their children. They should stop blaming anger and stress; these were taken as scapegoats for verbally abusing children.

To some extent, anger and stress cause adults to verbally abuse children. Verbal abuse in this case acts as a means of transferring anger to innocent children causing them psychological harm. Because of anger, adults saw everything the child had done negatively; hence they harshly talked to them.

## Author Biographies and contributions to the publication

Mary Sunday Kusemererwa is a religious sister of the Sisters of Notre Dame of Coesfield. She studied for the degree of Bachelor of Child Protection at the University of Kisubi (August 2019 to May 2022) and is now a teacher and child counselor at Notre Dame Primary School- Nairobi, Kenya. She was the lead student of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Psychology at the University of Kisubi in the 2022 Graduating Class. She picked interest in the study of verbal abuse, the study that led to this publication and she is the primary author of the article.

Aloysius Lwanga Bukonya, a Catholic priest and member of the Religious Missionary Institute of the Apostles of Jesus, was Dean of the School of Graduate Studies and Research




of the University of Kisubi. He is now a parish priest at St. Mary and St. Benedict Catholic Church, Coventry, England, UK. He supervised the research process and worked with the lead student to reconstruct the dissertation to turn it into a journal article.

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