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University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension EC04-471

When Words Are Used As Weapons: Youth Can Prevent Verbal Abuse (for use with teen youth)

(Part 4 of a four part series)

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Most physical abuse or battering begins with some kind of verbal abuse. Physical abuse is easy to identify because you can see a black eye or bruise. But verbal abuse is hard to see and define. Laws usually don't define verbal abuse or require it to be reported. Verbal abuse might be misinterpreted as a bad habit, a bad temper, or "just the way the person talks."

Verbal abuse can be a weapon used by either girls or boys, men or women. However, reports show that more women are abused by men, than men by women. Verbal abuse sometimes is found in significant partner relationships where there is sex, intimacy and commitment. It also can be found in families, work or school situations, among students, and even among friends. Unfortunately, it may even start when boys and girls begin to date. You can help prevent verbal abuse by learning more about what it means.

People may learn about verbal abuse by finding out how it is defined, what the signs are, how to prevent it, how to intervene in verbal abuse, and how to get help if needed. Verbal abuse is behavior that is hurtful, intimidating, fearful and unacceptable **and should be stopped!**

What is Verbal Abuse?

- **Verbal abuse** is persistent behavior using words and/or "mind games" to instill self-doubt in the assaulted person and to build the abuser's sense of dominance and control.
- **Verbal conflict** is an open verbal argument that comes from anger or rage and seeks to control a situation, not an individual.

Verbal abuse sometimes is disguised as "good natured" humor or "pet names."
Eg. *"You take everything too serious, can't you take a joke?"*
"Hey, little fatso, come over here!"

People who are verbally assaulted know the insults are abusive. By the tone of voice and the words used, the assaulted person feels hurt, confused and embarrassed. Assaulted persons usually try harder to explain their behavior and understand what was said or meant to be said. They try to be understood and

to figure out what they did wrong in the conversation. Attempts at trying to communicate with their partner are useless because the assailant works at keeping the assaulted person confused, upset and "unbalanced."

Have you ever said, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." That is false. Words indeed can be very hurtful. Let's take a look at how words can hurt others and yourself.

Examples of Verbal Weapons That Control

- **Countering**: Putting down the person's thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences; arguing any point or idea.

  Eg. One person has said it's cold.
  The other says, *"No, it's not cold out!"*
  Eg. One person has said that it sure is sad there's so much violence on TV.
  The other says, *"It's not that violent; you're just a wimp!"*

- **Withholding**: Refusing to share ideas, feelings, intimacy, thoughts and dreams between partners.

  Eg. One person doesn't talk to the other for several days on purpose (silent treatment).
  Eg. A husband doesn't speak with, touch, or embrace his wife for several days.
  Eg. "*I don't want to talk to you; you always get too emotional!*"

- **Discounting**: Minimizing the person's accomplishments or experiences.

  Eg. One person is pleased with her grade of a "B" on a test. The other person says, "*That's nothing! I always get A's.*"
  Eg. One person is happy about a raise in wages. "*You're always bragging on yourself! Your raise is only 50 cents an hour.*"

- **Verbal abuse disguised as jokes**: Telling jokes about the person that humiliate and embarrass.

  Eg. Her boyfriend says laughingly, "*You wouldn't believe how scared Maria gets when there's a thunderstorm. Let me tell you about the time she got in the closet....*"
  Eg. "*It's so funny that he lost his billfold. Can you believe he had to borrow money to pay for dinner? He's an idiot; he's an empty brain.*"

- **Blocking and diverting**: Verbally creating road blocks to the person's efforts to communicate; changing the conversation to gain control.

  Eg. One person expresses hurt feelings about being made fun of and being called names.
  The other says, "*Oh, where are my clean clothes*?"
  Eg. His girlfriend says that they need to spend more time together.
  The boyfriend says, "*It sure got cold today.*"

- **Accusing and blaming:** Blaming the other person for the abuse and excuses the abuser's (self) actions.

  Eg. One person says, "*I wish you wouldn't talk to me in that tone of voice.*"
  The other says, "*Well, if you wouldn't act so stupid, I wouldn't have to.*"

"*If you didn't make me mad, I wouldn't have to treat you like that.*"
Eg. One person says that they need to spend more time together.
The other person says, "*Well, if you weren't so emotional we would.*"
"*If you were more fun we would.*"

- **Judging and criticizing:** Putting down the person's thoughts, actions, and feelings.

  Eg. *"You always goof up. Can't you do anything right?*"
  Eg. "*You can't feel that way-it's just wrong-so forget it!*"
  Eg. "*I can't believe you would spend money on this*!"
  Eg. "*How could you have forgotten that?*"

- **Trivializing**: Pretending that the partner's opinions, thoughts, actions, or concerns don't count or are trivial.

  Eg. "*So what if you're tired! I need your help anyway.*"
  Eg. "*You're such a baby! I can't believe you're scared of storms.*"

- **Undermining**: Eroding the self-confidence and self-esteem of the person.

  Eg. "*Don't listen to her. She doesn't know what she's talking about.*"
  Eg. "*If I had an easy assignment like yours, it wouldn't have taken me nearly as long as you took to finish!*"

- **Threatening**: Implying harm to other's well-being.

  Eg. "*Don't you dare do that or I'll punch your lights out!*"
  Eg. One person in an angry tone of voice says, "*You'll regret it if you go out with him!*"

- **Name calling**: Stripping the person's identity by using a belittling name.

  Eg. "*You're such a jerk!*" Eg. "*You're a stupid good-for-nothing!*"

- **Chronic forgetting:** Regularly "forgets" appointments agreements, and incidents.

  Eg. The person forgets about the basketball game after promising to attend and spend more time together.
  Eg. The person forgets the other's birthday or their anniversary and then accuses the other of making "a mountain out of a mole hill."

- **Ordering**: Obvious displays of dominance and control.

  Eg. "*I told you to get that done today!*"
  Eg. "*I don't want you talking to your friends!"*
  A peer telling another, "*I won't allow you to go out with him.*"

- **Denial of anger or abuse:** When confronted about hurtful and unacceptable behavior, the abuser denies any wrongdoing.

  Eg. "*I didn't say that you are stupid! You're just making that up!*"

Eg. "*You think I'm hurtful to you? Look at the way you treat me!*"

- **Abusive anger**: Aggressive outbursts that threaten and may lead to physical violence.

Any of these verbal weapons used frequently or regularly, by themselves or together can erode self-esteem and the capacity to act independently. The weapons are used to manipulate, emotionally weaken and control the other person. They create shame, humiliation and hurt feelings. Verbal abuse should not be tolerated. People who are verbally assaulted rarely call for professional assistance but they should tell someone and try to get help. Understanding the types of verbal abuse and knowing about available resources, are several ways individuals might arm themselves against verbal abuse.

What can you do in a verbally abusive situation?

- Know you're under attack.
- Talk with your school counselor, teacher, parents, or another adult you trust.
- Plan how to make your defense fit your attack.
- Know how to follow through.
- You can walk away (if you're dating, living together or married).
- Use I statements to explain how it makes you feel.
- Be assertive and ask for changes in the relationship.
- Stay in the present and don't dwell on the past.
- Get professional counseling or support.

If you or someone you know is in an abusive situation please contact:

Nebraska Domestic Violence Sexual Assault Coalition (NDVSAC)
Toll free crisis line 1-800-876-6238. Web site: http://www.ndvsac.org

Outside Nebraska, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (voice) or 1-800-787-3224 (TDD).

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