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Using Harsh Verbal Discipline With Teens Found To Be Harmful

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Longitudinal Links Between Fathers' and Mothers' Harsh Verbal Discipline and Adolescents' Conduct Problems and Depressive Symptoms

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Many American parents yell or shout at their teenagers. A new longitudinal study has found that using such harsh verbal discipline in early adolescence can be harmful to teens later. Instead of minimizing teens' problematic behavior, harsh verbal discipline may actually aggravate it.

The study, from researchers at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Michigan, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

Harsh verbal discipline happens when parents use psychological force to cause a child to experience emotional pain or discomfort in an effort to correct or control behavior. It can vary in severity from yelling and shouting at a child to insulting and using words to humiliate. Many parents shift from physical to verbal discipline as their children enter adolescence, and harsh verbal discipline is not uncommon. A nationally representative survey found that about 90 percent of American parents reported one or more instances of using harsh verbal discipline with children of all ages; the rate of the more severe forms of harsh verbal discipline (swearing and cursing, calling names) directed at teens was 50 percent.

Few studies have looked at harsh verbal discipline in adolescence. This study found that when parents use it in early adolescence, teens suffer detrimental outcomes later. The children of mothers and fathers who used harsh verbal discipline when they were 13 suffered more depressive symptoms between ages 13 and 14 than their peers who weren't disciplined in this way; they were also more likely to have conduct problems such as misbehaving at school, lying to parents, stealing, or fighting.

Moreover, the study found that not only does harsh verbal discipline appear to be ineffective at addressing behavior problems in youths, it actually appears to increase such behaviors. Parents' hostility increases the risk of delinquency by lowering inhibition and fostering anger, irritability, and belligerence in adolescents, the researchers found.

The effect went the other way, too. Children who had conduct problems at 13 elicited more harsh verbal discipline from their parents between ages 13 and 14.

The study looked at 967 two-parent families and their children. About half were European American; 40 percent were African American and the rest were of other ethnic backgrounds. Most of the families were middle class. Students and parents completed surveys over a two-year period on topics related to their mental health, childrearing practices, the quality of the parent-child relationship, and general demographics.

Adolescents' conduct problems were assessed at ages 13 and 14 by survey questions like "In the past year, how often have you: a) been disobedient in school, b) lied to your parents, c) stolen from a store, d) been involved in a gang fight, and e) damaged public or private property for fun?" The response format ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*10 or more times*).

Parents' behaviors indicating harsh verbal discipline were measured by questions like "In the past year, after your child has disobeyed you or done something wrong, how often have you: a) shouted, yelled, or screamed at the child, b) swore or cursed at the child, and c) called the child dumb or lazy or some other name like that?" Items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*).

"This is one of the first studies to indicate that parents' harsh verbal discipline is damaging to the developing adolescent," says Ming-Te Wang, assistant professor of psychology in education at the University of Pittsburgh, who led the study. "The notion that harsh discipline is without consequence, once there is a strong parent-child bond—that the adolescent will understand that 'they're doing this because they love me'—is misguided because parents' warmth didn't lessen the effects of harsh verbal discipline.

"Indeed, harsh verbal discipline appears to be detrimental in all circumstances," Wang concludes.

Wang suggests that parents who want to modify their teenage children's behavior would do better by discussing with them their concerns about the consequences of the behavior. The study's findings can inform parenting programs so that parents can learn alternatives to shouting and insulting their teens.

The study was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse at the National Institutes of Health.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Longitudinal Links Between Fathers' and Mothers' Harsh Verbal Discipline and Adolescents' Conduct Problems and Depressive Symptoms by Wang, M-T (University of Pittsburgh) and Kenny, S (University of Michigan). Copyright 2013 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.