

Harsh verbal discipline increases the risk teens will misbehave and exhibit symptoms of depression.

What can parents do to rear a teen who is well-behaved, happy and respectful?

A tactic that doesn't work is broadly called harsh verbal discipline, whether that's shouting at teens, yelling, screaming, swearing, insulting or calling them names, says a study out today. In fact, those parenting actions increase the risk that the adolescent will misbehave and suffer symptoms of depression.

Shouting and yelling are ineffective and can be harmful, says study's author Ming-Te Wang, assistant professor in the department of psychology and the school of education at the University of Pittsburgh. "This may explain why so many parents say that no matter how loud they shout, their teenagers don't listen."

Wang and colleagues studied 967 two-parent families and their teens in Pennsylvania. Most of the families were middle class, generally white or African American. The parents and their children completed surveys over a two-year period on issues such as parent-child relationships and mental health.

Thirteen-year-olds who received a lot of harsh verbal discipline from their parents were more likely to have symptoms of depression at age 14, according to the findings published in the journal *Child Development*. They were also more likely to exhibit problem behaviors such as anger, aggression, vandalism and misconduct, Wang says.

Psychologists who work with teens and their families say parents should carefully consider the implications of these findings.

When you expose children to prolonged stress — and it does not have to be severe stress — you increase the risk of all kinds of physical and mental health problems, says Alan Kazdin, professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University and author of *The Everyday Parenting Toolkit*.

You do not want harshness in the home, Kazdin says. "We do not want toxins. That shows up in mental and physical health. We want acceptance, nurturing, love,

cuddling."

Ongoing harsh verbal discipline and criticism can fuel difficulties and rebellion in kids, says Neil Bernstein, an adolescent psychologist in Washington, D.C., and author of *How to Keep Your Teenager Out of Trouble and What to Do if You Can't*.

"Extremes of parenting don't work. The put-down parent is no more effective than the laissez-faire parent who is totally chill and sets no limits on their children's behavior."

That said, there are times where parents are justifiably angry and yell in exasperation, he says. For instance, if a teen has put himself in a dangerous situation, such as driving drunk or recklessly, a parent may scream, "You could have been killed."

"If parents are being honest, almost everybody has done that every once in awhile," he says. But this study is looking at ongoing harsh discipline — putdowns, cursing, yelling. "That isn't constructive," Bernstein says.

Neither is hitting teens. "Physical intervention, especially with teenagers, is notoriously ineffective, and it's much more likely to precipitate additional problems than it is to lessen whatever problem is going on," he says. "Kids are very big on being respected. If we want to respect our kids, we don't want to set the example that we are losing our temper and hitting them."

So what does work when rearing teens?

A better idea would be to use constructive consequences, something that educates rather than humiliates, Bernstein says. For example, if your teen violates a curfew, you might ground her for a few weeks explaining that when she convinces you it won't happen again, you'll return to your old agreement. "I'm well aware that taking away tech toys is a favorite punishment these days, but it should be done on a short-term basis to increase the motivation. For example, they get them back sooner for good behavior."

When it comes to rearing teens, "the big three are good communication, love and limits," Bernstein says. "If you consistently practice these three, chances are you'll raise a happy, healthy child."

The goal is to teach children to do the behaviors that you want, Kazdin says. Harsh yelling or punishment just stops the behavior at the moment, but does not develop the behaviors that you want, he says.

What parents need to do is catch their teens doing things right and praise those behaviors. If you do that, it will increase your respectful exchanges with them and decrease the disrespectful ones, Kazdin says.

For instance, if they do a good job setting the table or getting along with their siblings, praise them. If they are sharing information with you politely, then say, "That was great the way you spoke to me. I really appreciate it," and then give them a high-five or thumbs up, he says.

"We want to teach kids, not hurt them," he says. "If we are teaching our children, they are less likely to repeat the behavior. If we hurt or diss our children, we'll increase the likelihood of bad behavior."