

# Words that Wound

*Sticks and stones can break my bones, and words can also hurt me!*



Complexity



10-13 years



60 minutes



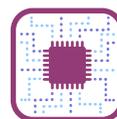
4-20



Discrimination



Violence



Digital Environment

## Type of activity

List-making, ranking, discussion

## Overview

Children consider examples of hurtful language or other online content, and assess its effects.

## Objectives

- To reflect on the causes and effects of hurtful language online (and offline)
- To understand how people may respond differently to online content
- To practise techniques for opposing hurtful language online

## Materials

- Post-its or slips of paper and sticky tape
- Flipchart paper or board and markers

## Instructions

1. Ask children if they have ever seen hurtful comments or images online. Explain that they should think about all online content, including videos, images, written comments, podcasts, etc. Take a few examples, and then hand out slips of paper to everyone.
2. Ask children to write down anything hurtful that they have seen online, including things that they might think are only slightly hurtful. For videos or images, they can write brief descriptions. Each comment or description should be written on a separate post-it or slip of paper. Give them some time to work on this individually and in silence.
3. Make a scale on the wall, such as the one below, making sure that children understand the differences between the categories. Ask the children to place their post-its or slips of paper where they think the content belongs on the scale. Encourage them not to talk during this part of the activity.

Playful	A bit hurtful	Painful	Very painful	Extremely upsetting and painful

4. When everyone has finished, ask the children to examine the wall silently. The same words will often appear several times, sometimes rated at different degrees of severity.
5. When the children are sitting down again, ask what they observed, guiding their analysis with questions such as these:
  - Did some words appear in more than one column? How do you explain this?
  - Why do you think that some people thought a word or expression was more hurtful than others did?
  - Were the hurtful comments addressed to people because of something they did or because they were perceived as “different”?

- Why do people say things like this online?
  - Do you think that hurting others in non-physical ways is a form of violence? Why or why not?
6. Ask the children if they can see any patterns among these hurtful words: can they group them according to the 'type' of person the insult is directed against? As children begin to identify and name these categories (e.g. relating to physical appearance, abilities, mental characteristics, sexuality, family or ethnic background), write down the categories on the board. Guide their analysis and prompt them to include other categories with questions such as these:
- Are some words only used against girls or only boys?
  - Are some words only used against children from different cultures?
  - Are some words only used against people with disabilities?
7. Ask the children to remove their post-its or slips of paper from the first chart and place them under the topic or category where they best fit. You may want to have one category labelled 'Other'. When the children are re-seated, ask questions such as these:
- What categories seem to have the greatest number of slips? How can you explain that?
  - Do the words considered most hurtful seem to fall into particular categories?
  - Do not answer aloud, but consider: do the words / expressions / jokes you use yourself fall into a particular category?

## Debriefing and evaluation

1. Discuss the activity using questions such as these:
- What do you feel about this activity?
  - Has it made you look more carefully at the words and expressions you use (online and offline)?
  - Do people have a responsibility to stop hurtful speech?
  - Is there anything we can do to stop it, or to protect people who are hurt by it?
  - What can you do if you see hurtful speech online?
  - What can you do if you witness hurtful speech offline?
2. Relate the activity to children's rights by asking questions such as these:
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognises freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental children rights. Should there be limits to freedom of expression or should we be allowed to publicly say or post online anything we want about other people? Why?

## Suggestions for follow-up

Continue the discussion about what children can do to stop hurtful language online and offline. Role-play name-calling situations and let children experiment together with ways to respond.

The activity 'From Bystander to Helper' helps children to think about what they can do to intervene when others are treating someone badly.

## Ideas for action

Show children the No Hate Speech Movement campaign of the Council of Europe. This can be found at [www.nohatespeechmovement.org](http://www.nohatespeechmovement.org) and contains many ideas for addressing hate speech online. Although the campaign has formally ended, there are numerous ideas and resources on the website.

Use this activity to discuss how the children use language within this group. Are there some words that the group agrees should not be used?

If your group has already developed group rules, consider adding a clause regarding hurtful language.

## Tips for the facilitator

You can limit the examples children consider to online content, or you may also want to include offline forms of expression. You could also ask them to include text messages, including group messages. Your choice may depend on the age of your group, and the extent of their exposure to digital media.

The activity requires sensitive judgment on the part of the facilitator. Although children know 'bad words' from an early age, they seldom discuss them with adults. Steps 2 to 4 may evoke embarrassment or nervous laughter. The children may need your reassurance that in this context it is acceptable to bring these words out in public. You are not 'using' them but discussing them.

It is a good idea not to say the words aloud but keep them unspoken, in written form only, except in the debriefing Step 3, where children are determining whether a word is acceptable or not.

A central learning point of this activity is that the same words can have a very different impact, depending on the context and the people involved. A word that one child may consider playful may be perceived as very hurtful by another. Do not let the discussion undermine the feelings of a sensitive child, just because others think a word is innocuous. You may want to spend more time exploring the factors that could sensitise someone to certain words.

This activity is not recommended for groups of a wide age range. Be aware that some children will not know the meaning of some words, especially those related to sexuality. Young children may not understand that some words relate to sexual behaviour. Adapt this exercise carefully for your specific group.

The debriefing is essential for this activity. Give the children plenty of time to make their own categories and draw their own conclusions, otherwise the link to human rights will be tenuous at best. You could remind them of articles in the CRC which protect them from harm or abuse, for example, Articles 2, 13, 16 and 19. Article 13, which protects freedom of expression, is perhaps particularly worthy of note, as it explicitly states that freedom of expression can be restricted to protect "the rights or reputations of others".

Ensure you have contact numbers for support services for children who are experiencing online bullying.

## Adaptations

For younger children, you will probably want to focus the activity on hurtful speech offline. Conclude by reflecting with the group on how to prevent using words that hurt people, and perhaps by role-playing ways to respond to hurtful language. You could also ask the children to tell you the "bad words" by whispering them to you. In this way, you can collect the words for them and list them on the flipchart.