# Sticks and Stones

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

It is one of those lines adults hand to children like a shield. A chant of resilience. A verbal vaccine against playground cruelty. I remember hearing it often enough that it seemed like an established truth, a small cultural law designed to help young humans toughen up in a world where not every interaction would be kind. But the older I get, the more I realise that this rhyme might be one of the most misleading pieces of folk wisdom we ever passed down.

If words did not hurt, psychologists would be out of work. Counsellors would not exist in such numbers. Trauma would not echo in memory decades after a comment spoken casually by a teacher, a parent, a peer. And we would not be witnessing the tragic rise in mental health crises among teenagers whose wounds are not visible on skin, but carved into identity through digital humiliation, exclusion, and sustained verbal attack. The rhyme belongs to a different world. A smaller one.

In that earlier setting, insults were local. They travelled no further than the schoolyard, the street, the neighbourhood. They faded. The moment passed. The words, though painful, had limited reach and limited memory. Today, a sentence typed in seconds can be seen by hundreds, sometimes thousands. It can be replayed, screenshotted, forwarded, weaponised. It can follow someone into the quiet of their bedroom, into the night, into the private space where there is no teacher to intervene and no bell to signal the end of the day. We have built an environment where language does not merely express reality, it *creates* it.

Reputation, belonging, status, identity: these are now shaped as much by text on a screen as by face-to-face interaction. Words are no longer fleeting sounds. They are architecture. They construct the social world we inhabit. A rumour can become a fact through repetition. A label can become a self-concept. A joke can become a stigma. Psychology has long understood something the nursery rhyme denies: humans are relational beings. We do not exist as sealed units. Our sense of who we are forms in the reflections we see in others’ responses to us. Approval, rejection, ridicule, praise,

these are not surface experiences. They are signals that feed directly into our nervous system, our stress responses, our self-worth.

Neuroscience now shows that social pain activates many of the same brain regions as physical pain. Being excluded, shamed, or mocked is not simply “in the mind” in the dismissive sense of the phrase. It is embodied. The heart rate changes. Hormones shift. Sleep is disturbed. Appetite alters. The body reacts as if under threat, because, in evolutionary terms, it is. For most of human history, exclusion from the group meant danger. In this light, the old rhyme begins to look less like wisdom and more like wishful thinking.

Yet it emerged for a reason. It was not invented to deceive, but to protect. It tried to offer children a tool for emotional survival: a way to reduce the power of others’ words by refusing to internalise them. In its own limited way, it encouraged resilience. The problem is not that resilience is wrong, it is that resilience alone is not enough in a world where language has multiplied in reach, permanence, and force. The rhyme tells the target of harm to be tougher. It says nothing to the speaker.

In the digital age especially, that imbalance becomes dangerous. We have enormous cultural energy devoted to telling young people to build self-esteem, confidence, and coping skills. Far less attention is given to the responsibility that comes with the power to speak, or type — into someone else’s life. Freedom of expression is loudly defended; care in expression is often treated as optional. But if words truly have no power, why do we treasure love letters? Why do apologies heal? Why do speeches inspire nations? Why do memorial inscriptions matter? Why does a single sentence of encouragement sometimes change a life’s direction?

We know, when it suits us, that words can lift. We are just slower to admit that the same mechanism can wound. Perhaps the most important correction to the rhyme is not to discard resilience, but to pair it with responsibility. Yes, we need the inner capacity not to be shattered by every passing remark. But we also need a cultural shift that recognises language as a tool with consequences. Speech is an action. Communication is behaviour. Words enter the social ecosystem and do work there.

In this sense, the old rhyme hides a deeper truth: humans are not weak because words affect them. We are connected. The same sensitivity that allows us to be hurt allows us to bond, to learn, to cooperate, to love. To feel the impact of language is not a flaw; it is a feature of being social creatures. We do, in fact, carry a contradictory piece of wisdom that exposes the flaw in the rhyme: “The pen is mightier than the sword.” We repeat this line with admiration, as though it captures a noble truth about the power of ideas, persuasion, and language to shape history more profoundly than physical force. Revolutions have begun with pamphlets. Wars have been justified by speeches. Nations have been unified, or divided, by rhetoric. Laws, treaties, constitutions, and declarations are not weapons of steel, yet they reorder societies and determine the fate of millions.

If the pen is mightier than the sword, then words are not harmless. They are instruments of influence, capable of building systems and dismantling them. They can legitimise cruelty or protect rights. They can incite violence or prevent it. The same species that warns children that words cannot hurt also commemorates the writers, speakers, and thinkers who altered the course of history through language alone. The contradiction is revealing. We acknowledge the power of words at the level of politics and history yet minimise it at the level of personal life. But the scale may differ more than the mechanism. Just as a speech can move a nation, a comment can shape a person. The battlefield may be smaller, but the consequences are still real.

Understanding this changes the moral equation. It asks us to move beyond the idea that the solution to verbal harm lies solely in thicker skins. It suggests instead that part of the solution lies in gentler tongues. If words can wound, they can also heal. They can include rather than exclude. They can acknowledge rather than dismiss. They can challenge cruelty instead of amplifying it. In classrooms, online forums, workplaces, and families, language can create climates of safety just as easily as climates of fear.The old rhyme tried to make children invulnerable. That was never realistic. A wiser aim might be to make communities more careful.

Sticks and stones can indeed break bones. But words build worlds. And once we accept that, we gain not only a warning, but an opportunity.