

Words Matter – How to Communicate Effectively with Your Kids

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You'll see *lots* of parenting articles about "7 things you should NEVER say to your kids." They imply that your child will be damaged if you say these things. We all know that kids are more resilient than that, and that parents don't need to police their own words so anxiously. However, there are lots of ways that we can improve our communication with our kids, and help them succeed, by thinking intentionally about how we speak to them.

(Note: whenever words are underlined, that means you can find more info on this at www.GoodDaysWithKids.com)

Phrase "parenting experts" may caution parents against using	Negative / non-helpful ways the phrase <i>could</i> be heard by a child if this is all you ever said to them	Alternative things to say or do that may be more helpful
<p>Good Job / Great Job / Good girl</p> <p>That's a beautiful picture You did that just right What a perfect building you built!</p> <p>You're the best _____ in the whole wide world</p>	<p>Empty praise – if it was something that's really easy for them to do, it's weird to say good job.</p> <p>Judgement – implies that there's one right way to do things. They're reached their limit – you don't think they can do any better.</p> <p>They'll someday realize you're lying or exaggerating and lose faith in your judgment. Or they'll feel pressure to really become the best.</p>	<p>Only praise things that took effort. Focus on the <u>process</u> and HOW they did it and what they learned rather than on the product. Give specific detailed feedback about what's good, and what could be even better. Emphasize progress: "Wow, just a little while ago, you couldn't do X, and now you're really good at it. If you keep practicing, someday you'll be able to do Y" You can ask questions to ask to <u>extend their learning</u> such as "what will you do next?" "What was the hardest part?" or "What do you like best about it?"</p>
<p>I love it when you.... It would make me happy if you... I'm ashamed when you.... I'll never forgive you</p>	<p>Conditional love. Also implies that your emotional well-being as an adult is dependent on your child's behavior of the moment.</p>	<p>Let your children know that you will always love them, no matter what. (This doesn't mean that all their behavior is always OK – it's not, and you do need to <u>set limits</u>. And it doesn't mean you don't have <u>high expectations</u> for them – you do want them to work hard and be good people. But your happiness can't be dependent on that.)</p>
<p>Practice makes perfect</p>	<p>Well, practice makes much better. But, it doesn't make perfect because nothing is perfect. And encouraging them to aim for perfect implies that you think mistakes are evil.</p>	<p>"Practice and you will improve." "Making mistakes helps us get better." "If you aren't making any mistakes, this is too easy for you and maybe you're ready for more challenge."</p>
<p>What's wrong with you?</p>	<p>Implies that the problem is with them, instead of with the situation.</p>	<p>"What's wrong?" "What happened that upset you?"</p>

<p>You're so [shy, smart, clumsy, pretty] You're the [strong, fast, silly, wild] one You always... You'll never... [lose, win, do anything wrong / right] You're worthless / a loser Girls don't do that / Boys don't like..</p>	<p>This is all labelling. Labelling a child limits them. If you label them based on a problem behavior, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and they continue to be that way. If you label them by a "talent" they have, then that creates a lot of pressure on them to retain that talent. They worry about losing your love / their identity if they don't succeed in that area.</p>	<p>You do want to understand your child's <u>temperament</u>, <u>gender influences</u>, and <u>learning style</u> and help support them in using their strengths to build confidence and work around the things that come harder to them. But don't "label" kids or think they'll never change. Praise effort, not talent. Let them know that everyone can get better at anything if they work at it. Learn more about the <u>growth-based mindset</u>.</p>
<p>You're just like [someone I don't like] Why can't you be more like.... Stop acting like a baby. You're so [bad adjective] Big boys don't... Good girls don't....</p>	<p>These statements are intended to <u>shame</u> a child. "A child's self-identity is shaped around the things they hear about themselves."</p>	<p>Let your child become the very best them they can become without worrying whether they are just like someone else. If you disapprove of a child's behavior, tell them how to change the behavior. Try not to attack their identity or their sense of being worthy of your love.</p>
<p>Let me help you Just let me do it for you You're doing it wrong, let me do it You're too slow, I'll do it</p>	<p>Implies that they're not competent. If you rescue your child from every challenge, how will they ever learn to do anything on their own?</p>	<p>Allow them to be frustrated. When we're struggling with something, we're on the verge of learning something new. Ask guiding questions – "what happens if..." Make gentle suggestions "Try..." If you're really in a hurry say "I need to help you so we can get to preschool on time. Tomorrow you can try again when we have more time."</p>
<p>You're OK (when child is hurt/crying) Don't cry It's dumb to get upset about that Don't worry, it will be fine There's no reason to be scared</p>	<p>Dismisses their feelings as unimportant. Tells them not to trust their intuition and just do things even if they seem risky. (This could get them into all sorts of trouble as teenagers.)</p>	<p>Validate emotions and pain first, <i>then</i> reassure. Once you've said "I hear that you're scared / hurt / worried" <i>then</i> you can address logical reasons why you believe that it will be OK in the end. Learn more about <u>emotion coaching</u>.</p>
<p>Don't talk to strangers.</p>	<p>This blanket message can make your child fearful of everyone and also limit their ability to learn the social skills they'll need as adults who very frequently have to talk to strangers!</p>	<p>Model appropriate ways to interact with appropriate strangers. Talk to them about how to tell the difference. Read more about how to help your kid judge whether to <u>talk to strangers</u> and talk about "<u>tricky people</u>."</p>

Be careful.	If <i>over-used</i> , can create a fearful child who thinks the world is a dangerous place. <u>Teacher Tom</u> says: "An adult who commands, "Don't slide down that banister!" might be keeping a child safe in that moment, but is... robbing him of a chance to think for himself, which makes him that much less safe in the future when no one is there to tell him what to do."	Demonstrate / model how to be safe Encourage them to look before leaping. Encourage them to tune into how they feel about something – if they're nervous, is there a good reason? When the risk is just a mild bump or bruise, let them test things. Someday they'll get that bruise, and they'll learn something important. Read more about <u>teaching safety skills</u> .
I'll never let anything bad happen Don't worry – you'll always be safe I promise – I'll never die. I'll always be here	Don't make promises that you can't keep. You can say that you'll <i>try</i> to do these things.	"I'll do my best to keep you safe. I'll try to always be there for you, as long as I live. Sometimes bad things happen and I'll try to help give you tools for coping with that."
You're in the way. I can't get anything done with you around. Hurry up. You're making us late. Shut up. I have better things to do than... Would you just leave me alone for 5 minutes?	We all know that children are terribly inconvenient room-mates who just make everything harder. But, we don't need to tell them that every day! These sorts of statements create stress and anxiety and make the child wonder if he is loved.	Give positive, concrete suggestions for other positive, <u>concrete things they could be doing</u> in the moment. When you really need a break or need help, admit it and ask for it. That's part of modelling <u>self care</u> . "Mama is really sick today. I need your help. Can you sit and play quietly for just a few minutes?"
If then..... If you do [this bad thing], then you'll get [this punishment].	"I'm expecting bad behavior and am looking forward to punishing you."	When ... then.... "When you do [good thing that I'm expecting you to do], then we'll get to do [this fun thing] together." Learn more about <u>punishment and reward</u> .
Wait till your father gets home...	Makes someone else into a bad guy. Implies that you don't have enough power to enforce consequences.	<u>Consequences</u> should be immediate, logical, and enforced by the parent who encountered the misbehavior.
I told you so That's what you get for not listening	Yes, you probably told them not to do something, and yes, it's frustrating when they do it anyway. But rubbing it in serves no purpose.	"Well, that's not what you were hoping would happen is it? What could you do differently in the future so you don't have this problem again?"
Because I said so	Implies that you make arbitrary judgments on a whim and they have no control over that.	"I'm your parent, and it's my job to keep you safe and help you grow up to be a good person and keep things running well around the house. Sometimes I have to enforce rules you don't like. It feels unfair to you, but I will continue to do what I think is best."

Rewrite These Sentences

"Great job! I love the blue sky and these are the prettiest flowers I've ever seen."

"You are the smartest kid in the world. Math just comes naturally to you."

"It makes me so happy when your team wins."

"Why are you always such a whiny kid?"

"Why can't you be more like your brother? His room is never this messy."

"Let me do that. It looks messy when you do it."

"Don't cry. Just get back up and do it till you get it right."

"Watch out. Be careful. You could get hurt climbing that."

"I'll never let anything bad happen to you."

"I have more important things to do today than listen to you tell me about..."

"I told you that if you did that, you'd spill your milk."