

Watch Your Words

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I watched from a distance as the desperate mom yelled at her child, “Would you just calm down? Calm down right now! If you don’t calm down, I’ll give you a big smack!”

Her child—unsurprisingly—did not calm down.

The mom became more agitated. “I’ve had it with you. You’re a little brat.”

We’ve all been there—and we’ve been frustrated with ourselves because of it. We don’t want to speak badly to our children. But now and then we find ourselves stressed out, and those words just flow.

Are they damaging? Or is it ok to go off the rails, swear, name call, and apologize later?

Our words create our world. Whatever direction your words lead, your mind and body will follow. We believe what we tell ourselves. Language is powerful.

For example, if you’ve ever made a mistake and muttered under your breath, “You idiot”, chances are you didn’t immediately pause and argue back, “I am not an idiot. Why would I say that about myself?” Instead, you simply accepted it. You believed yourself. After all, you can clearly see what an idiot you are!

Our language doesn’t just affect us and the way that we see ourselves. It affects the way we see our children.

A parent I sat with described all of the reasons she couldn’t stand her teenage daughter. “She’s so selfish. She thinks of no one but herself. She’s disrespectful. She’s wasteful. She treats our home like a hotel.” The list of complaints was long. Much of it was likely true. But when I asked her to tell me about her daughter’s positive attributes, it was like I was hearing about a different child.

“Well, actually, she’s really caring. And she is a great sister. She can be generous.” The list could not have been more different when this mum focused on her daughter’s positives.

The language we use about one another—and towards one another—impacts how we see one another. With this in mind, let’s review some things that we can easily say about our kids that, in hindsight, it might be best to avoid saying. (We’ll leave the hateful, nasty kind of stuff out because it’s usually obvious that those things are unhelpful. Besides, there are much more interesting things we often say to our kids that are counter-productive and may even be harmful.)

1. Don’t say: “Calm down.” Say: “You are so upset.”

Telling someone to stay calm has the opposite effect on them from the one we want. It’s dismissive, and it denies emotions. No one in history has ever been told to calm down and responded with, “Ok, you’re right. I’m out of control, but I’m better now!”

Instead, focus on labeling, the emotion. [If you can name it, you can tame it](#). It makes it normal, ok, and something everyone else experiences from time to time.

2. Don’t say: “You’re so clever!” Ask: “How did you feel when…”

Research tells us that [praise leads to inferences of low ability](#). It’s like saying “Wow, this broccoli is awesome.” Kids are thinking, “If it’s that good, why are you trying to sell me on it so hard?” People don’t believe praise.

And all that stuff that world famous “[mindset](#)” researcher, [Professor Carol Dweck](#), says about [praise for effort](#) rather than the person? Well, it’s still evaluative, and it still promotes a fixed mindset rather than growth. The best thing to do is turn it back on the person/child. “Hey. You seem really happy with that outcome. Tell me what you did to get it?” Once they’ve praised themselves, they’re more likely to accept your congratulations and kind words.

3. Don’t say: “Urgh, you’re just like your mother.” Say: “Wow, this is really challenging for you.”

We want to avoid comparison at all costs. This is just a put down at another’s expense. If you want to finger point, whether it’s with a child or an employee, be clean and clear rather than

implicating others. Highlight what you're observing. "In these situations, you seem to struggle with..." Then offer to help.

4. Don't say: "Because I said so." Say: "Let me tell you why this matters."

Our goal is to provide a "why." When people have a [clear rationale](#) for the requests we are making they are far more likely to be compliant, or to respond with thoughtfulness if they disagree with what we've asked. Because I said so is an unhelpful power trip.

5. Don't say: "I was lousy at that." Say: "It's amazing what we can do when we try."

Again, telling someone they aren't any good at it because we aren't is making excuses and promoting a victim mentality. We can promote a [growth mindset](#) by highlighting what happens when we have-a-go, put in the effort, and work hard at something. Lousy at math? It's amazing what we can do when we try. Can't write essays or run the cross-country course? Hmm... can't YET.

These alternative statements emphasize the power and positivity of a growth mindset. Much better than being a victim.

6. Don't say: "Don't be so stupid." Say: Nothing—pause, walk away.

Ultimately, it's just plain disrespectful. But more than that, it's not going to motivate someone. We don't motivate others by making them feel lousy. Instead, if you're mad because they're doing something dumb, ask them to stop. Provide a clear rationale. And if you can't say something nice, then be quiet.

Remember, what seems stupid to us makes sense to them or they wouldn't do it. So be curious, not cranky. There's always a reason for challenging behavior—and as we understand, we can redirect and improve things.

The research tells us that saying horrible things to others is every bit as damaging as other forms of abuse. It affects [cognitive function](#). Some [research](#) suggests that verbal abuse (which can include name calling and other horrible things like some of those above) has effects comparable to witnessing domestic violence, and it is worse than physical abuse!

This is serious stuff.

Things will come out of our mouths that can hurt. The trick is to say fewer of those things and build our children up—especially in our own eyes. Our words create worlds—ours and our children’s.

Dr. Justin Coulson is a bestselling author, husband, and father of 6. His new book is [10 Things Every Parent Needs to Know](#) and is available now.

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