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# **Positive Reinforcement: 7 Things You Shouldn't Say to Your Child**

We all say the wrong thing sometimes, leaving our kids feeling hurt, angry or confused.

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#### **"Leave Me Alone!"**

A parent who doesn't crave an occasional break is a saint, a martyr or someone who's so overdue for some time alone she's forgotten the benefits of recharging. Trouble is, when you routinely tell your kids, "Don't bother me" or "I'm busy," they internalize that message, says Suzette Haden Elgin, Ph.D., founder of the Ozark Center for Language Studies, in Huntsville, Arkansas. "They begin to think there's no point in talking to you because you're always brushing them off." If you set up that pattern when your children are small, then they may be less likely to tell you things as they get older.

From infancy, kids should get in the habit of seeing their parents take time for themselves. Use pressure-release valves—whether signing up with a babysitting co-op, trading off childcare with your partner or a friend or even parking your child in front of a video so that you can have half an hour to relax and regroup.

At those times when you're preoccupied, set up some parameters in advance. I might have said, "Mom has to finish this one thing, so I need you to paint quietly for a few minutes. When I'm done, we'll go outside."

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#### **"You're So..."**

Labels are shortcuts that shortchange kids: "Why are you so mean to Katie?" Or "How could you be such a klutz?" Sometimes kids overhear us talking to others: "She's my shy one." Young children believe what they hear without question, even when it's about themselves. So negative labels can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Even labels that seem neutral or positive—"shy" or "smart"—pigeonhole a child and place unnecessary or inappropriate expectations on her.

The worst ones cut dangerously deep. Many parents can still vividly, and bitterly, remember when their own parents said something like "You're so hopeless" (or "lazy" or "stupid").

A far better approach is to address the specific behavior and leave the adjectives about your child's personality out of it. For example, "Katie's feelings were hurt when you told everyone not to play with her. How can we make her feel better?"

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#### **"Don't Cry."**

Variations: "Don't be sad." "Don't be a baby." "Now, now—there's no reason to be afraid." But kids do get upset enough to cry. They do get sad. They do get frightened. "It's natural to want to protect a child from such feelings," says Debbie Glasser, Ph.D., director of Family Support Services at the Mailman Segal Institute for Early Childhood Studies at Nova Southeastern University, in Fort Lauderdale. "But saying 'Don't be' doesn't make a child feel better, and it also can send the message that his emotions aren't valid—that it's not okay to be sad or scared."

Rather than deny that your children feel a particular way—when they obviously do—acknowledge the emotion up front. "It must make you really sad when Jason says he doesn't want to be your friend anymore." "Yes, the waves sure can be scary when you're not used to them. But we'll just stand here together and let them tickle our feet. I promise I won't let go of your hand."

By naming the real feelings that your children have, you'll give them the words to express themselves—and you'll show them what it means to be empathetic. Ultimately, they'll cry less and describe their emotions instead.

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#### **"Why Can't You Be More Like Your Sister?"**

It might seem helpful to hold out a sibling or friend as a shining example. But comparisons almost always backfire. Your children are themselves. It's natural for parents to compare their kids, to look for a frame of reference about their milestones or their behavior, say experts.

But don't let your child hear you doing it. Kids develop at their own pace and have their own temperament and personality. Comparing your child to someone else implies that you wish yours were different.

Nor does making comparisons help change behavior. Being pressured to do something they are not ready for (or don't like to do) can be confusing to little kids and can undermine their self-confidence. They are also likely to resent you and resolve not to do what you want, in a test of wills. Instead, encourage her/him current achievements

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#### **"You Know Better Than That!"**

Like comparisons, quick gibes can sting in ways parents never imagine. For one thing, children actually may not have known better. Learning is a process of trial and error. Did your children really understand that a heavy pitcher would be hard to pour from? Maybe it didn't seem that full, or it was different from the one they have successfully poured from by themselves at preschool.

And even if they made the same mistake just yesterday, your comment is neither productive nor supportive. Give your children the benefit of the doubt, and be specific. Say "I like it better if you do it this way, thank you."

Similar phrases include "I can't believe you did that!" and "It's about time!" They may not seem awful, but you don't want to say them too much. They add up, and the underlying message kids hear is: "You're a pain in the neck, and you never do anything right."

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#### **"Stop or I'll Give You Something to Cry About!"**

Threats, usually the result of parental frustration, are rarely effective. We sputter warnings like "Do this or else!" or "If you do that one more time, I'll spank you!" The problem is that sooner or later you have to make good on the threat or else it loses its power. Threats of hitting have been found to lead to more spanking—which itself has been proven to be an ineffective way to change behavior.

The younger a child is, the longer it takes for a lesson to sink in. "Studies have shown that the odds of a two-year-old's repeating a misdeed later in the same day are eighty percent no matter what sort of discipline you use," says Murray Straus, Ph.D., a sociologist at the University of New Hampshire's Family Research Lab.

Even with older kids, no discipline strategy yields surefire results right off the bat every time. So it's more effective to develop a repertoire of constructive tactics, such as redirection, removing the child from the situation, or time-outs, than it is to rely on those with proven negative consequences, including verbal threats and spanking.

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#### **"Wait till Daddy/Mommy Gets Home!"**

This familiar parenting cliché is not only another kind of threat; it's also diluted discipline. To be effective, you need to take care of a situation immediately yourself. Discipline that's postponed doesn't connect the consequences with your children´s actions. By the time the other parent gets home, it's likely that your children will actually have forgotten what they did wrong. Alternately, the agony of anticipating a punishment may be worse than what the original crime deserved.

Passing the buck to someone else also undermines your authority. "Why should I listen to Mom if she's not going to do anything anyway?" your child may reason. Not least, you're putting your partner in an undeserved bad-cop role.

*Paula Spencer is the coauthor of two recently published books,* Consciously Female *and* The Happiest Toddler on the Block.

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