

Words Matter – How to Communicate Effectively with Your Kids

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There are lots of words that we say to our kids which may seem fine... but could have unintended consequences if we over-use them. Thinking intentionally about your words can improve your communication with your kids, and increase their chances of success.

Note: any time you see underlined words, that means you can learn more about this at www.GoodDaysWithKids.com.

Words that you may say	What a child <i>could</i> hear in this	Alternative things to say that may be more helpful
<p><i>Non-stop praise:</i> Good Job / Great Job / Good girl That's a beautiful picture You did that just right What a perfect building you built! You're the best _____ in the whole wide world</p>	<p>If you praise everything they do, even easy stuff, praise is meaningless. It can also imply you think they've reached the peak of their potential and they don't need to (or can't) get better. If you say they're the very best, someday they'll realize you're exaggerating. Or feel pressure to really be 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. Ask questions to <u>extend their learning</u> such as "what will you do next?" "What was the hardest part?"</p>
<p><i>Labelling:</i> You're so [shy, smart, clumsy, pretty] You're the [strong, fast, 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>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><i>Telling them they're not capable:</i> You can't do that – it's too hard</p>	<p>Implies that they will never be capable.</p>	<p>"You can't do that <i>yet</i>. But let me show you things you can do now that will help you learn how to do that someday." 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"</p>
<p><i>Shaming:</i> 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><i>Telling them they're not good enough</i> 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. Let them make mistakes and learn from them. If you're really in a hurry say "I need to help you today. Tomorrow you can try again when we have more time."</p>
<p><i>Dismissing their feelings:</i> Don't cry. You're OK 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 emotion coaching.</p>
<p><i>Being overcautious:</i> Be careful. Watch out. You may get hurt.</p>	<p>Of course we caution them about really dangerous things. But we don't want to over-use this so they are frightened of everything.</p>	<p>Prepare, don't scare: Model / demo how to be safe. When the risk is just a mild bump or bruise, let them test things. It could be a low-risk learning experience.</p>
<p><i>Pushing them away:</i> Leave me alone for 5 minutes Please stop talking Go away, I need to get important stuff done</p>	<p>We all know that children are terribly inconvenient room-mates who just make everything harder. But, these sorts of statements create stress and anxiety and make the child wonder if he is loved.</p>	<p>Give positive, concrete suggestions for other positive, concrete things they could be doing in the moment. When you really need a break, admit it and ask for it. That models self care. "Mama is really sick today. I need your help. Can you sit and play quietly for just a few minutes?"</p>
<p><i>If then...</i> If you do [this bad thing], then you'll get [this punishment].</p>	<p>"I'm expecting bad behavior and am looking forward to punishing you."</p>	<p>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 punishment and reward.</p>
<p><i>I told you so:</i> That's what you get for not listening</p>	<p>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.</p>	<p>"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?"</p>
<p><i>Telling them how to do things they already know how to do:</i> Hang your coat up. Wash hands.</p>	<p>Implies that you don't think they're smart or competent. Implies that they only need to do those things when you tell them to.</p>	<p>Ask them what to do: "Where does your coat go? What do you do before we eat? I bet you know what you need to do next."</p>
<p><i>Don't _____</i> Don't throw that / spill that / hit the dog / slam the door</p>	<p>If you just tell child what NOT to do, they have to stop their impulse to do it, and then figure out some idea for what they can do instead. Both are hard for little ones to do!</p>	<p>Tell them what <i>to do</i>: "Carefully hand that to me. Move your milk so it doesn't spill. Pet the dog softly. Close the door gently."</p>
<p><i>You did that wrong:</i> Why do you mess things up?</p>	<p>Tells them mistakes are bad. May make them afraid to try things they're not sure about.</p>	<p>"Oops, that didn't work. What could you do differently?" "Making mistakes helps us get better."</p>

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."

"Why are you always such a whiny kid?"

"That puzzle is too hard for you. Go play with your dolls."

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

"Let me do that. It looks sloppy 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 have more important things to do today than listen to you tell me about..."

"If you don't go to bed right now, then no bedtime stories!"

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

"Pick up your socks and put them in the laundry bin."

"Don't scribble so hard."

"If you build the tower like that, it's just going to fall down."

How do you think your child would respond if you said your new sentences instead of the ones that were written here?