

Things Your Child Should Never Hear You Say

Have there ever been times when, in the heat of an argument, you have spoken words you wish you could retract? The answer is probably 'yes' for most of us.

We spend a lot of time at home and at school teaching children that their words have power, because we know this to be true. Our words have power to heal and to hurt.

For parents speaking to our children, this is especially true. As parents, we have a remarkable amount of psychological power over our children. The language we use when speaking to them has the power to build them up, or to break their hearts and destroy their self-esteem – either way creating the person they will become. Children find it particularly hard to let go of hurtful words they have heard from a parent. These words cannot be unheard. When unkind words are spoken, what becomes embedded in the mind of a child is, 'If my parent thinks this about me, it must be true'.

When you are arguing with your child, the things they say to you can sound like a personal attack: 'You never let me do anything', 'You always take her side', 'You never listen to me', 'You hate me', 'You're always on your phone', 'You're so unfair', 'I hate you'. Children are very good at speaking in superlatives – there no grey areas; it's 'always' and 'never'. They sure know how to push our buttons. Sometimes their cries actually carry an element of truth and this can add the element of guilt to our anger.

The challenge for us as parents is to recognise and remind ourselves that it is an angry child or adolescent we are dealing with, not an adult, and our response must, above all things, come from a place of love. Even when we are feeling attacked and hurt – especially when we are feeling attacked and hurt, it is our job to model the loving response. It is not to get one up with a cruel retort. We are not our child's peer. We are not in competition with them. While they are escalating and becoming emotional and making the argument a personal attack, we must keep our feet on the ground and at all costs refrain from saying something hurtful and regrettable; words that can't be unheard.

Probably at the top of the list of things to never say would be, 'I wish I never had kids', and variations on this theme: 'I wish you'd never been born', 'I should never have had children', 'No wonder your father doesn't want anything to do with you', 'You can go and live with your mother', 'You make my life miserable', or worse.

To be fair, the thought of life without children has probably passed through the mind of many parents in moments of exasperation; during a hard or emotional argument with a child. However, using words about 'regretting' your parenthood to express your disappointment or to make your child feel badly about something they have done will only serve to damage your relationship with them. In fact, a child who begins to fear that your love may be conditional may act out even more.

'I hate you, too'. When you say this to win the argument, you have already lost the argument. You have lowered yourself to their level. Comparisons, for example, 'You're just like your mother!', 'Why can't you be more like your brother?', 'I never had this much trouble with your siblings', can cause emotional pain. Comparing a child to the other parent, particularly after a divorce or separation, can leave a child wondering about the future of your relationship with them. Will you 'separate' from them too? Comparing a child to their siblings in a negative way can cause rivalry and resentment and damage their relationship too.

Saying things like, 'Get out of my sight,' 'I'm through with you,' 'I don't want anything to do with you' can cause a child to become fearful and anxious. Children rely on their parents for their survival. When the person who is responsible for providing love, nurture, food and shelter threatens to cut them off, the result can be shocking and create ongoing doubt and fear.

Telling your children that, 'Nan agrees (that you are being difficult/naughty)', 'All my friends agree', 'Aunty Jane agrees with me', simply tells your child you have been discussing her in a negative light with your friends and family members. She will feel hurt and betrayed and the trust between you will be damaged.

Raising children is hard, and it is arguably the most challenging thing we ever do, but it is also the most important and rewarding. It is not OK to excuse nasty behaviour towards your children by saying they 'push your buttons' and 'you can't help it'. We can choose our behaviour. We are certainly better able to do so than children. When you are feeling angry with your child and recognise you might say something regrettable try some of the following:

- Take a deep breath. Pause. Say nothing for a moment. This will help you feel a little calmer and give you a chance to think.
- If it helps, walk away. Put some physical space between you and your child but say something like, 'I'm just going to take a minute to calm down. I don't want to shout at you.'
- Create for yourself a little stockpile of phrases you can call on when you feel your buttons are being pushed. For example, 'I don't want to argue with you about this', 'I love you and want you to be safe', 'This is not about how much I love you. That never changes', 'I feel angry now. I will talk to you about this after tea/in the morning/ after school today' (make a definite time and keep your word). This can buy you some time to think things through and talk to the other parent if necessary.
- Finally, resolve to stop. If you know you say cruel things to your child, decide today that you will stop; that you will actively find other ways to manage the strong feelings that cause you to speak this way. This may even mean seeking some support or counselling. Your relationship with your child is worth it.

Whenever you do say something hurtful to your child in the heat of the moment, it is vital that you go back later and apologise. Tell them that what you said is not true and acknowledge that it was wrong of you to say it. Do not offer an excuse. To say that it was

because you were angry implies justification. Say instead that you will try to do a better job of managing your anger in the future. Reiterate your love.

There are no perfect adults or perfect parents. Our children do not arrive as a blank slate – they come with their own little personalities, but we parents play an enormous part in moulding them into the children, adolescents and adults they become. Perhaps you recognise that the way you parent is the way you yourself were parented. This is more than likely so. If you don't like it, or if it's not working as you would hope, you have the power to change it.

The following website was used in the preparation of this article:

<https://www.empoweringparents.com/article/6-things-you-should-never-say-to-your-child/>

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