

# 10 Things To Stop Saying to Your Kids and What to Say Instead

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Current research shows that some of the most commonly used and seemingly positive phrases we use with kids are actually quite destructive. Despite our good intentions, these statements teach children to stop trusting their internal guidance system, to become deceptive, to do as little as possible, and to give up when things get hard. Here's a list of the things to eliminate from your vocabulary **NOW** if you want your child to grow up to be kind, community-minded, and successful. I've also included alternatives so that you can replace these habitual statements with phrases that will actually encourage intrinsic motivation and emotional connection.

We all say things to our kids that we later regret, and sometimes the things that come out of our mouths are just automatic and unconscious. You know, like the times when you realize you've just said the exact same thing that your mother used to say to you ?! Other times, we might think we're helping to build them up when we're actually hurting our children's confidence. Here are more key phrases to look out for and suggestions for alternative language that will build the confidence, emotional awareness, and connection you want for your kids.

## 1) "Good Job!"

The biggest problem with this statement is that it's often said repeatedly and for things a child hasn't really put any effort into. This teaches children that anything is a "good job" when mom and dad say so (and only when mom and dad say so).

**Instead try, "You really tried hard on that!"** By focusing on a child's effort, we're teaching her that the effort is more important than the results. This teaches children to be more persistent when they're attempting a difficult task and to see failure as just another step toward success.

## 2) "Good boy (or girl)!"

This statement, while said with good intentions, actually has the opposite effect you're hoping for. Most parents say this as a way to boost a child's self-esteem. Unfortunately, it has quite a different effect. When children hear "good girl!" after performing a task you've asked them for, they assume that they're only "good" because they've done what you've asked. That sets up a scenario in which children can become afraid of losing their status as a "good kid" and their motivation to cooperate becomes all about receiving the positive feedback they're hoping for.

**Instead, try "I appreciate it so much when you cooperate!"** This gives children real information about what you're wanting and how their behavior impacts your experience. You can even take your feelings out of it entirely and say something like, "I saw you share your toy with your friend." This allows your child to decide for himself whether sharing is "good" and lets him choose to repeat the action from his internal motivation, rather than doing it just to please you.

## 3) "What a beautiful picture!"

When we put our evaluations and judgments onto a child's artwork, it actually robs them of the opportunity to judge and evaluate their own work.

**Instead try, "I see red, blue and yellow! Can you tell me about your picture?"** By making an observation, rather than offering an evaluation, you're allowing your child to decide if the picture is beautiful or not, maybe she intended it to be a scary picture. And by asking her to tell you about it, you're inviting her to begin to evaluate her own work and share her intent, skills that will serve her creativity as she matures and grows into the artist she is.

#### 4) **“Stop it right now, or else!”**

Threatening a child is almost never a good idea. First of all, you’re teaching them a skill you don’t really want them to have: the ability to use brute force or superior cunning to get what they want, even when the other person isn’t willing to cooperate. Secondly, you’re putting yourself in an awkward position in which you either have to follow through on your threats—exacting a punishment you threatened in the heat of your anger—or you can back down, teaching your child that your threats are meaningless. Either way, you’re not getting the result you want and you’re damaging your connection with your child.

While it can be difficult to resist the urge to threaten, try sharing vulnerably and redirecting to something **more appropriate instead**. **“It’s NOT OK to hit your brother. I’m worried that he will get hurt, or he’ll retaliate and hurt you. If you’d like something to hit, you may hit a pillow, the couch or the bed.”** By offering an alternative that is safer yet still allows the child to express her feelings you’re validating her emotions even as you set a clear boundary for her behavior. This will ultimately lead to better self-control and emotional wellbeing for your child.

#### 5) **“If you \_\_\_\_\_ then I’ll give you \_\_\_\_\_”**

Bribing kids is equally destructive as it discourages them from cooperating simply for the sake of ease and harmony. This kind of exchange can become a slippery slope and if used frequently, you’re bound to have it come back and bite you. “No! I won’t clean my room unless you buy me Legos !”

**Instead try, “Thank you so much for helping me clean up!”** When we offer our genuine gratitude, children are intrinsically motivated to continue to help. And if your child hasn’t been very helpful lately, remind him of a time when he was. “Remember a few months ago when you helped me take out the trash? That was such a big help. Thanks!” Then allow your child to come to the conclusion that helping out is fun and intrinsically rewarding.

#### 6) **“You’re so smart.”**

When we tell kids they’re smart, we think we’re helping to boost their self confidence and self-esteem. Unfortunately, giving this kind of character praise actually does the opposite. By telling kids they’re smart, we unintentionally send the message that they’re only smart when they get the grade, accomplish the goal, or produce the ideal result — and that’s a lot of pressure for a young person to live up to. Studies have shown that when we tell kids they’re smart after they’ve completed a puzzle, they’re less likely to attempt a more difficult puzzle after. That’s because kids are worried that if they don’t do well, we’ll no longer think they’re “smart.”

**Instead, try telling kids that you appreciate their effort.** By focusing on the effort, rather than the result, you’re letting a child know what really counts. Sure, solving the puzzle is fun, but so is attempting a puzzle that’s even more difficult. Those same studies showed that when we focus on the effort — **“Wow you really tried hard on that!”** — kids are far more likely to attempt a more challenging puzzle the next time.

#### 7) **“Don’t cry.”**

Being with your child’s tears isn’t always easy. But when we say things like, “Don’t cry,” we’re invalidating their feelings and telling them that their tears are unacceptable. This causes kids to learn to stuff their emotions, which can ultimately lead to more explosive emotional outbursts.

**Try holding space for your child as he cries. Say things like, “It’s OK to cry. Everyone needs to cry sometimes. I’ll be right here to listen to you.” You might even try verbalizing the feelings your child might be having, “You’re really disappointed that we can’t go to the park right now, huh?”** This can help your child understand his feelings and learn to verbalize them sooner than he might otherwise. And by encouraging his emotional expression, you’re helping him learn to regulate his emotions, which is a crucial skill that will serve him throughout life.

#### 8) "I promise."

Broken promises hurt. Big time. And since life is clearly unpredictable, I'd recommend removing this phrase from your vocabulary entirely.

**Choose instead to be super honest with your child. "I know you really want to have a play date with Sarah this weekend and we'll do our best to make that happen. Please remember that sometimes unexpected things come up, so I can't guarantee that it will happen this weekend."** Be sure you really are doing your best if you say you will too. Keeping your word builds trust and breaking it deteriorates your connection, so be careful what you say, and then live up to your word as much as humanly possible.

One more note on this, **if you do break your word, acknowledge it and apologize to your child.** Remember, you're teaching your kids how to behave when *they* fail to live up to their word. Breaking our word is something we all do at one time or another. And even if it's over something that seems trivial to you, it could matter a lot to your child. So do your best to be an example of honesty, and when you're not, step up and take responsibility for your failure.

#### 9) "It's no big deal."

There are so many ways we minimize and belittle kids feelings, so watch out for this one. Children often value things that seem small and insignificant to our adult point of view. So, try to see things from your child's point of view. Empathize with their feelings, even as you're setting a boundary or saying no to their request.

**"I know you really wanted to do that, but it's not going to work out for today," or "I'm sorry you're disappointed and the answer is no,"** are far more respectful than trying to convince your child that their desires don't really matter.

#### 10) "Why did you do that?"

If your child has done something you don't like, you certainly do need to have a conversation about it. However, the heat of the moment is not a time when your child can learn from her mistakes. And when you ask a child, "Why?" you're forcing her to think about and analyze her behavior, which is a pretty advanced skill, even for adults. When confronted with this question, many kids will shut down and get defensive.

**Instead, open the lines of communication by guessing what your child might have been feeling and what her underlying needs might be. "Were you feeling frustrated because your friends weren't listening to your idea?"** By attempting to understand what your child was feeling and needing, you might even discover that your own upset about the incident diminishes. "Oh! He bit his friend because he was needing space and feeling scared, and he didn't know how else to communicate that. He's not a 'terror,' he's a toddler!"