



by Karen Stephens

## Careful Choice of Words Protects Self Esteem

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Wise parents know that phrase holds as much truth as the other childhood chant, “Step on a crack and you’ll break your mother’s back.”

In reality, broken bones do heal and rarely remind us of childhood mistreatment. It is words that sear our hearts. Name-calling, threatening, and belittling language from angry parents or teachers can recurrently bubble up and cause long lasting and pervasive pain throughout adulthood. Ask any mental health professional.

Children take words to heart, especially those from the adults they love. Children want and need to believe what their parents say about them. It’s our responsibility to give them something worth believing. The verbal and nonverbal tone at home, child care, and school has a direct impact on how well a child regards him or herself. The resulting self-esteem will affect relationships in school, work, marriage, parenting, and even grandparenting.

Behavior problems related to poor self esteem reverberate throughout our child care centers, school buildings, and judicial courts. Learning how to prevent damage to children’s mental health is imperative for parents who want to raise proud, confident, and responsible kids.

Most children become what adults tell them they can become. Through behavior and speech, parents communicate to children the boundaries of their potential. Most children receive feedback from adults who encourage them to do their best and to think well of themselves. Surely you’ve given, and hopefully received such comments.

But many adults speak to children in a manner that conveys contempt, disapproval, and dislike. Children spoken to in such ways can enter their teen years feeling worthless. Their resentment leads to rebellion towards any authority. Newspapers and television news programs are full of stories stemming from poor self esteem that bleed onto our streets and into our court system.

The actions and words adults use when interacting with children from birth affects how children develop as civilized human beings. During infancy we communicate with children through nonverbal language. How quickly we respond to infants’ cries for food or comfort communicates how worthy we consider them to be. How gruffly or gently we place children in bed conveys just how valuable we think they are. How comfortably or tensely we hold their hands through the supermarket conveys whether we perceive them to be frustrating burdens or persons deserving of our patience and respect. Children are always listening — to our behavior as well as our words.

The phenomenon of children living up to or down to adults’ perceptions of them is referred to as the “self fulfilling prophecy.” The premise is that children behave the way in which we expect them to behave. Uplifting verbal or nonverbal feedback increases the odds of children behaving cooperatively. Negative labels we verbally stick onto children increase the odds of perpetuating behavior that

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drives us nuts! Have you ever noticed the more you call a child a “rowdy,” “hyper,” or “loudmouth,” the more the child behaves accordingly? You are witnessing the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Think of the labels some children endure on a daily basis. Do you remember hearing any of the following? “If you weren’t so lazy you would do better in school.” “You’re a troublemaker just like your brother.” “I knew I couldn’t trust you; you’ve always been a sneak.” “You’re bad, nasty, mean . . .”

Or you may have heard the same backhanded compliment a friend of mine regularly received from her father during adolescence: “Good thing you’re pretty, ’cause you’re not too smart.” (Ouch. That’s not the best foundation for raising a girl to become confident in her abilities as well as her beauty.)

Comments such as these are sometimes referred to as “cold pricklies.” (In comparison to compliments or positive feedback called warm fuzzies.) Children can survive a cold prickly now and then and not suffer psychological harm. In fact, it’s important for children to learn to deal with occasional cold pricklies. After all, not everyone our kids meet is going to adore them as much as we do! It is when children receive little else *but* cold pricklies that good self esteem is truly in jeopardy.

I’m not saying that children should never receive negative feedback. In fact, I think our role as parents and teachers is to give direction — sometimes on a minute by minute basis! But the manner in which we give feedback is often counterproductive to our primary goal: children who will think well of themselves and master acceptable behavior.

To preserve good self esteem, do your best to target feedback directly to specific behavior, not to a child’s general worth as a person. It’s a fine distinction, but one worth making. There is a world of difference between saying, “You’re such a rude girl” and saying, “It’s rude to spit into someone’s face. Use words to discuss the problem if you’re angry.” The former infers that the girl herself is rude as a person with little hope of changing. The latter infers that the action of spitting is rude. At the same time it holds out the hope that the child can find another way to vent her anger. (And the sooner the better!)

When you give children feedback, focus on the behavior and let it guide the content of your communication. It’s good to tell a child you trust her to do better next time. For example in a firm, but controlled voice, state: “I’m angry when you spit instead of telling your sister what’s wrong. I’m confident next time you’ll talk it out. Please get a Kleenex and help her clean her face.”

Holding out this hopeful attitude and expecting children to make amends tells the child that you aren’t giving up on her as a person. It reassures her that the relationship is intact while at the same time insisting that the behavior must change.

Using clear and caring communication techniques is a great way to preserve and build children’s self esteem. They will also allow you to be proud, rather than ashamed, of your parenting communications.

To learn about encouraging ways to communicate with children, see Parenting Exchange library article, “Encouraging Words Build Children's Confidence.”

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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