



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 14

Worst Mistakes Parents Make When Talking to Kids

Words can change your kid's brain. Learn to use the right ones.

[Parenting](#) is one of the most challenging, yet meaningful life tasks. Unfortunately, popular [wisdom](#) and misconceptions about how to raise responsible kids can lead to ineffective communication and power struggles. Some parents use authoritarian parenting strategies that do not allow the child an independent voice or sense of efficacy. Other parents overcompensate with overly permissive parenting that doesn't teach kids about limits and [self-control](#). Research shows both extremes can interfere with kids' ability to regulate emotions and form healthy relationships as adults. The best type of parenting is fair, flexible, respectful, and has learning, rather than submission as its goal. Hearing and respecting feelings, allowing choice, yet setting fair and clear limits on unacceptable behavior is the healthy balance that we should all strive for. This article will teach you how to avoid ineffective ways of communicating that lead to noncompliance and power struggles, or damage [self-esteem](#).

(1) Talking Too Much

When parents go on and on, kids tune them out. Researchers have shown that the human [brain](#) can keep only four "chunks" of information or unique ideas in short-term (active) [memory](#) at once. This amounts to about 30 seconds or one or two sentences of speaking.

Ineffective Example

"I'm not sure what we should do about ballet and softball this semester. You know, you really probably can't do both because softball is on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays at 4, but then you have to change and put your hair in a bun, so that won't be enough time, unless you pack all your ballet stuff on Monday night, which means it has to get washed on Sunday....."

There are so many different ideas in this message that the kid will get confused and tune the parent out. Also, the message has an overall negative, anxious tone that can cause the kid to react with doubt and anxiety. It is not necessary to tell the kid all of the information at once. Rather, break it up into separate steps to be more digestible. Let the kid express his/her overall preference first, before bringing up all the obstacles.

Effective Example

“If you do both ballet and softball this semester, you’ll have to go right from one to the other some nights. Let’s sit down and figure out if this makes sense for both you and me.”

In this example, the parent is limiting the conversation to two sentences, which makes it easier for the kid to absorb the information. She is also being clear about the overall goal (make it work for both), and the next steps she is requesting (sit down and discuss the issue). Finally, she is communicating a willingness to [collaborate](#) and consider the kids' needs as well as her own.

(2) Nagging and Giving Multiple Warnings

Most parents are familiar with the early morning rush to get everybody out the door on time, along with their lunches, gym clothes, musical instruments, signed homework, and so on. The child who gets distracted and seems unmotivated to get ready on time is the greatest challenge to a busy parent. Many parents feel out of control and try desperately to control the situation by nagging or criticizing. The problem with nagging is that you are actually training kids to ignore you because they know there will be more reminders down the road. While very young kids, may need more assistance and instruction, effective parents allow the kids to take increasing responsibility as they grow older.

Ineffective Example (to a 10-year-old kid)

“I’m waking you up an hour early because you are never ready on time. You need to get dressed right now. Do you have the homework for me to sign? “

Ten minutes later.

“I told you to get ready and you’re still lollygagging. You’re going to make us all late. Go and brush your teeth and put your clothes on.”

Ten minutes later.

“Where is your homework? I asked you to bring it for me to sign? And you’re not finished dressing. We are going to be late.”

And so on.

This parent is taking way too much responsibility and indirectly communicating to the kid that she doesn’t trust him to manage the situation without extensive instruction and interference. This so-called “helicopter parenting,” can lead to unconfident, overly dependent kids, according to Dr. Carol Dweck, a best-selling author and researcher on parenting and [motivation](#). The tone is also negative and intrusive, which is likely to create resentment and resistance or [passive-aggression](#).

Effective Example

“We will be leaving for school in 45 minutes. If you don’t have everything you need, it’s up to you to explain it to your teachers.”

These instructions are brief and convey a clear expectation, with a consequence for not complying. They are free of judgment, anxiety, and attempts to control. The parent allows the kid to learn from the natural consequences of his/her own behavior

3) Using [Guilt](#) and [Shame](#) to Get Compliance

One of the biggest lessons one learns as a parent is that young kids don’t naturally have empathy and consideration for your needs. They develop empathy slowly as they mature, by experiencing your empathy for them. That’s why the expectation that young kids walk in your shoes and see things from your point of view may not be reasonable. The failure to do so does not mean they are a bad or uncaring kid. They are just being a kid — focused on having fun in the moment, and testing their limits to learn about what is acceptable. Most parents are stressed multi-taskers who often forget to take care of themselves. This can lead to resentment when kids don’t seem to be cooperating. It is important to take some time to connect with your own feelings and calm down using deep breathing or self-talk before letting these emotions leak and derail your communication with your kid.

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Ineffective Example

“I have asked you repeatedly to tidy up your toys and here they are, strewn all over the living room floor. Don’t you care at all? Can’t you see that I’ve been on my feet all day taking care of everybody’s needs. Now I have to trip over your toys or waste my time cleaning them up. What’s wrong with you that you’re so selfish?”

This parent is creating a lot of negative energy. While we can all empathize with her frustration, her communication is blaming and disrespectful. Calling a kid “selfish,” or implying there is something wrong with her is also harmful. Kids internalize these negative labels and begin to see themselves as “not good enough.” Humiliating or shaming a kid can shape brain pathways in negative ways. Label the behavior as unacceptable, but the kid as still lovable.

Effective Example

“I see the toys haven’t been packed away yet and that makes me upset. It’s important for me to have an orderly house that we can all function in. All the toys that are out will need to go [sleep](#) in the garage tonight. You can earn them back by tidying away all of your toys tomorrow.”

This parent is clearly communicating her own feelings and needs without [anger](#) or blame. She is applying a clear, but not overly punitive consequence for the behavior and providing an opportunity for the child to try again tomorrow and succeed. She does not attribute any negative motivation to the kid or label his [personality](#) in negative ways.

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4) Not Listening

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We would all like to teach our kids to respect other people. The best way to do this is by modeling respectful and caring behavior in our own interactions. This helps the kid learn the value of respect and empathy and teaches them the skills of effective communication. Often, attentive listening is the most difficult thing for parents to do, because kids keep interrupting us, or our minds are preoccupied with all the errands that have to be done. In this case, it is okay to say to the kid “It’s difficult for me to listen to you now because I’m busying cooking, but I’ll be there in 10 minutes.” It’s better to set aside a clear time for communication than to listen half-heartedly or resentfully. Remember, though, that it’s difficult for kids to wait for long periods to be listened to

Ineffective Example

Parental response to a kid saying they scored a goal at soccer

(without making eye contact) “Oh, that’s nice, dear. Now go and play with your sister (muttering to herself) What temperature do I cook the chicken at?”

Effective listening involves all of the non-verbals, such as maintaining eye contact, conveying [understanding](#) with our faces and voices, and using words to reflect our understanding. This parent is teaching her kid not to bother her, and that the things that are important to him are not important to her. This can make a kid feel alone and not good enough.

Effective Example

Parental response to a kid saying they scored a goal at soccer.

“You scored a goal. Fantastic! I can see you feel really proud of how you played. I want to hear all about how it went down today.”

This parent is displaying interest and enthusiasm; inviting the kid to elaborate and describe what happened. She is effectively tuning into the kid’s nonverbal expression and reflecting his feelings, thereby helping the kid to gain awareness of his own reactions. This type of response leads to the kid feeling that he is important and worthy of attention and care. This type of empathic resonance helps the kid to develop more interconnected brain pathways to process and make sense of emotion.

Parenting is a difficult job, and one in which we all make mistakes at times. Communicating effectively with our children takes time and energy. We need to become aware of our own

feelings and automatic reactions, and slow down enough to be able to choose a more mindful way. Following through with consequences teaches kids limits, while listening and granting autonomy teach kids respect. Be sure to take care of yourself enough so that you have this type of mindful energy for your kids. This may mean re-examining your priorities and letting some things go. It is well worth it. Kids who have respectful, engaged, consistent parents learn to regulate their own emotions more effectively, feel better about themselves, and are able to have more loving relationships as adults.

About the Author

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