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I think its basic human psychology that often we speak without carefully considering our choice of words. Sometimes we talk first, and think later, but as parents we need to remember that children take our words very seriously and often at face value, even when we don't mean what we say.

I'm often surprised by just how much of an impact our parent's words have on us. I know friends who still remember things their parents said to them over 20 years ago; both good and bad.

A student of mine once remarked to me how she remembered that her mother once said to her in a fit of rage that "she was so naughty and disobedient that it would have been better for the family if she was never born". I'm sure the mother didn't really mean it, but the fact that my student remembered it 15 years later illustrates just how much of an impact these words had on her.

The message is clear; we need to be careful of what we say to our children. Our choice of words is significant. They have the potential to build up, encourage and empower and conversely they can tear down, break and weaken our children.

The following are some tips on how we can watch what we say:

Affirmation and Recognition

DO SAY "I love you" to your child. This affirms their place in your heart and provides a feeling of security which is appropriate in the context of a family. Research indicates that when children grow up secure in their parent's unconditional love, they demonstrate a healthy pattern of development throughout their lives.

DON'T SAY "I love you" when praising a child's performance. For example, if they've done well in school, or accomplished a task successfully; then use phrases like "well done", "I'm proud of how hard you worked" "great effort" "that's fantastic" "I'm happy that you did so well". The reason why you should not use the phrase "I love you" when praising a child's success, is so that the child does not get the impression that your love for them is tied to a successful performance. By implication then, you may be sending the child the message that "I only love you when you do well in school, and I love you less when you do poorly".

Some parents say that it is dangerous to praise a child because it will lead to them feeling overly proud or conceited; as we say in Asia; "their head may become so big" that they no longer have the motivation to work hard in the future. That's categorically not true.

Research in developmental psychology has shown praise inspires children to be more motivated, interested and engaged in their endeavours; so we should not be scared of praising them. A phrase like "I am proud of you" is very important for a child to hear from a young age all the way up to when they are adults.

Disciplining and Correcting

DON'T compare your child with other children. We have a tendency to make comparisons; "why can't you be more like your cousin, he is so clever", or "why can't you be a good girl like your sister".

This is potentially damaging to your child's self esteem. It sends them the message that you wish they were someone else and they may take this message of rejection to heart. I know many adult friends who grew up their whole lives feeling that their parents never loved them or valued them as much as their siblings.

When correcting or scolding a child always focus on the behaviour, not the child. It is healthy to say things like "I did not like it when you snatched the toy from the other child", or "It was very naughty when you spoke rudely to the maid", or "I am not happy when you do not tell me the truth." You notice in these examples that the comments are directed towards the offensive behaviour, not towards the child.

DO NOT make statements that label the child or over generalize the behaviour; for example "You are always naughty", "you are a bad girl", "you are such a naughty boy", "you're such a scaredy cat", "you're always inconsiderate" "why are you always so disobedient". These statements are not constructive because they seem to suggest that the child is ALL bad, ALL naughty, which is obviously not the case. Labels can be dangerous because they often end up being self fulfilling prophecies. When a child gets labelled "bad" or "naughty" they may very well start to behave in a way that is consistent with the label.

DO give reasons for why the behaviour is wrong. "It's not right to snatch other people's things because it makes the other person sad." "I'm not happy when you run down the stairs because it is dangerous and you may fall down and hurt yourself."

DO NOT say things to purposely shame or humiliate the child like "See everyone is looking at you and laughing at you, shame, shame on you". It may be expedient to shame the child into doing what we want to them to do, but this clever manipulation of a child's emotions in the long term ends up encouraging the child to be overly self conscious.

In conclusion

Perhaps one of the most important things we can say to our child, and one of the most difficult things to say to anybody is, "I'm sorry, I was wrong". Yet it is important for parents to show the child that it is right to apologize if we've done something wrong. We cannot expect our child to apologize when we do not lead by example.

Some parents think it is unacceptable for a parent to apologize to a child as it compromises their position of authority. I would disagree. We're not perfect and we should not pretend to be perfect, and I can tell you that our children certainly, already know that we are not perfect. So there's no need to pretend that we do not make mistakes. If we apologize, we in fact maintain our authority as parents, because we show that we practice what we preach.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010