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Family Focus

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what you want to say. Remember to formulate "I" messages and to describe the behavior you don't like. This usually takes some forethought. There are more benign ways to get your message across, such as: "I know it's hard sometimes to share, but Cassie would like a turn on the scooter. Can you please give her a turn in a few minutes? That would be really nice."

2) "Never" or "always"

Sweeping generalizations are usually not accurate and can be quite inflammatory. They are also not fair since most behavior isn't so extreme. Parental statements using "always" or "never" tend to alienate children and cause resistance and rebellion. Instead of saying, "You never put away your laundry," it would be better to say, "I wish you would put away your laundry without my having to remind you."

No one wants to drop everything immediately to do someone else's bidding. Instead of saying, "I want you to set the table/clean your room/empty the garbage/do the dishes right now," give your child some latitude. It's much better to give some notice, such as, "You have five minutes before it's time to put away your LEGOs." Or, "Please do the dishes as soon as possible after dinner." And be sure to obtain an agreement. If you have an agreement it is much easier to remind your child to do something he or she promised and avoid being accused of nagging your child.

3) "Because I say so" or "Because I'm the parent/adult"

This kind of power play doesn't go over well, and usually generates resentment if your child is over the age of 3. It's better to say that you have reasons for your decision and you'll share some of them with your child when he or she calms down or after they cooperate.

It's a delicate balance because you don't want to be in the position of having to explain yourself to your child before he or she acts upon your request. This would be placing yourself in a weak position with your child; he or she would then be the judge of whether or not your request is fair or appropriate.

If you wait until your child has complied, then you still maintain control but you show you are willing to share your reasoning so he or she can be more a part of the process.

4) "If you don't do what I've asked, you're grounded/you have no cell phone for a month/ you've lost all your privileges."

Parental threats tend to elicit anger and resistance, not cooperation. Often they are made impulsively and contain unrealistic or extreme measures. If you don't follow through with them, you are exposed as a parent who doesn't mean what you say and you risk losing your future credibility.

Parents start out in a vaulted position in the eyes of our children. It is up to us to preserve this position. Even if it seems that your child doesn't care what you say, think or feel, he is paying attention and caring.

Parental words and actions can hurt even many years later. Often, grown women and men become tearful in my office while remembering a parent's hurtful comment or seeming disregard. Sometimes a parent will think saying something hurtful isn't a big problem as long as there's an eventual apology. But the initial hurt a child experiences can linger for a long time.

Here are some comments to avoid saying to your child. Some are highly critical, while others can be a set-up for ongoing conflict.

1) "You're stupid/lazy/mean/selfish/a brat/inconsiderate."

When you label your child, usually in anger and frustration, that term can resonate with him or her for years. Even if you have complimented your child 20 times more often than you have criticized her or him, your negative comment will carry much more weight.

When you're angry, take a few breaths and think first

It's better to have an agreement about consequences ahead of time for misbehavior, disrespectful comments, or failure to perform chores.

Then you can say, "Unfortunately, I'll need to apply the consequence we discussed if you don't apologize/clean up your room by the deadline."

If you don't already have an agreement, you can take time to think about what you want a consequence to be. You don't have to specify immediately what action you will take. You can say, "If you don't do what I ask, I'm going to have to think of a consequence for you."

Reluctant discipline is best, while threats are alienating.

5) Comparing him to his siblings or to anyone else

Whether or not your intentions are good, comparing your child to someone else, even favorably, places you in a position of being judgmental. Just about everyone dislikes feeling judged by others, and knowing we're being judged makes us self-conscious around those who are doing the judging. After all, the same person who complimented us at the expense of someone else can turn around at any point and compare us unfavorably.

If parents want to promote harmonious sibling relationships, making comparisons sabotages this effort. If they are compared unfavorably, children grow to resent the person they're being compared to, while a favorable comparison can set up unhealthy rivalry among siblings.

As I've written before in this column, comparing ourselves to others too much can lead to discouragement and lowered self-esteem. You will probably need to help your child avoid doing this to him or herself as it's such a natural tendency. Consequently, it's even more important not to add external comparisons to those he or she may already struggle with internally.

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