

Where to Begin

What NOT to say? Adults with responsibility for one- to six-year-olds have enough to do without worrying about the finer points of language! Why pay so much attention to what we say? Because ill-chosen words are at the heart of most negative interactions with kids. Being mindful of our words, and how they are said, is vital for a child's well-being. How adults talk to kids greatly influences who they turn out to be. It's as simple and as important as that.

The 66 expressions presented here are among the most common we use with children. Some of these may be in your repertoire—or Aunt Alice's—and some you wouldn't dream of saying. Of course this collection isn't exhaustive. We adults can always come up with more! After you've read the chapter introductions and discussions of the “don't say” sentences, you will have a framework for recognizing other nonproductive things said by you and others in the child's world.

Some detrimental expressions will resonate with you right away and it will be easy to drop them. Others may fall away more slowly. We all have those “I can't believe I just said that” moments. If you catch yourself saying something ineffective—or worse—don't be hard on yourself. Awareness always precedes change. Rather than dwelling on occasional poor form, focus on your intention to improve.

Just as important as recognizing harmful language is knowing what words to use instead. Young children can be very challenging, so it's helpful to have clear ideas about what to say when they push our buttons, or do something outlandish. I offer many specific suggestions for how to say it better. When one approach doesn't work, try a different one. The plan is to fill up your “bag of tricks” with verbal and behavioral responses that get results.

The first step in using clear and positive language with a young child is gaining awareness of what you are really communicating, through not only words but also body language, actions, and tone of voice. Send the right messages by modeling behavior you want, and using words and a tone you'd like to hear back. Even the child who is too young to talk is paying close attention and storing information about what you say, and the way you interact with him and others around you.

Likewise, children communicate to us through not only words but everything they do. Part of our job as grown-ups is to figure out the message when there are no words. Sometimes it's an expression of interest, for example, a toddler who may be thinking, *That lamp cord looks so appealing I want to grab it.* Other times it's a feeling, a need, or both: *I'm tired and need to take a nap* or *My brother is getting all the attention and I want some.* To consider what may be motivating a child will help you decode his actions. You can then respond in a more understanding and productive way.

Children often exhibit behavior that baffles us. Aggression and emotional outbursts are familiar territory for anyone interacting with young kids. The chapter introductions and discussions offer new ways of looking at these issues, and creative approaches to talking about them. The topic may even be one that brings up discomfort and insight about your own childhood, for example, sexuality or shame. If you're mired in power struggles, I'll lead you to more peaceful ground. Looking for new ways to guide a child toward healthy habits? I have suggestions. Take all the suggestions one at a time, and don't be discouraged if you don't get instant positive results. Making these changes is a process, not a prescription. If you want to delve further into any area that is discussed, look through Resource Books for Grown-ups for some excellent reading choices.

As well as reading about children, reading *to* them is invaluable. Good children's books can have a positive effect on behavior, and can change a child's understanding of the world. For a young child, even a preverbal baby, regular reading aloud is a habit I encourage. Characters in a story provide a great way to explore important topics such as kindness, common fears, and even death. Books also enhance language skills, and allow adults to offer little ones focused attention and a diversion that can instantly calm and corral them. A difficult situation can often be ended by simply saying, "Come over here. Let's read a book." Great children's books related to the chapter subjects are suggested throughout.

Little kids are messy and silly, frustrating and wise. Raising a child, or just spending the day with one, can be a real adventure. Bring your flexibility and patience—and don't forget a sense of humor. These qualities, and using the right words along the way, will promote understanding and a peaceful atmosphere. And you will enjoy your time with children more.