The Trouble With Words

By R.N. Whitehead

Your son's report card is sitting on the table and you are not happy. Math is lower than it should be, his teacher noted that he did not hand in all his assignments, and he got a "Needs Improvement" for effort. What do we do? If you are like most of us, you will sit down with your son and have a little talk.

How well do those talks work? Do they actually motivate our kids or do they just fly in one ear and out the other? Maybe it is the words! When we are stressed, frustrated, tired or annoyed, we sometimes use words that work against us. Often they bring about the opposite result.

Most of these counter-productive words occur at or near the beginning of a sentence. Here are some examples of words that can do more harm than good:

• **"Why?"** This word is usually followed by "don't you, can't you, won't you," or "did you." For example: "Why can't you keep your room clean?"

The word Why asks for an answer, but we are not really asking for information when we utter it. We are just blaming or criticizing. Kids will not be motivated to help if they feel that they are being criticized. In fact, for most children, this question cannot be answered. Most children do not know why they do things, they just act on their emotions.

Leave out the Why and change the question to a clear, precise statement such as, "I want you to keep your room clean." Even if your child could answer the question, why would you want to know the answer anyway? You really just want a change to occur. Be clear about your expectations and you will achieve them more often than not.

• **"If…"** In this context, the word If is usually followed by the word "you," especially when it is being used as a threat. For example: "If you do that again, you'll be sorry!" or "If you don't treat your clothes better, I won't buy you any more."

The problem here is that we often can't carry out our threats. They are uttered when we are angry and not really rational. But, if we don't carry through on our threats, our children become confused and we lose our ability to speak with authority. Often the threat uttered this way is out of proportion to the actual offence.

Use the words, "as soon as" or "when" instead of If. These words are more precise and positive. Kids will not perceive them as a threat and they encourage you to stay rational and to weigh the deed against the consequences. For example: "As soon as you have hung up your shirt, we can play that game."

• **"Never," "Ever," and "Always"** These words etch a trait into a concrete reality and can become self-fulfilling prophecies. In addition, they are damaging to an emerging self-concept because kids will believe what you tell them. Sentences such as

"You never pay attention to her feelings!" can make children believe a negative quality about themselves that may not even be completely true.

Instead, describe your expectations clearly and make it plain that you expect them to be lived up to. "You know that I expect you to be kind to your little sister. I will not allow violence or threats to be used. Please find a way to fix your problem that is kinder and less likely to get you into trouble with me."

• "**You"** These are blaming statements and can damage a child's self-esteem. "You're a bad boy"; "You don't care about anybody else!"; "You're acting like a baby."

These are large statements about a child's character instead of specific statements about his behaviour! They are negative and accusatory and will put kids on the defensive. Instead, use 'I' statements that describe your own feelings and expectations. "I'm angry about this behaviour" or "I am upset when other people's property is not respected."

As parents, we must learn how to motivate our children. That is part of our job. We can make our own lives much easier if we pay more attention to what we say and the words we use. Try to follow this old axiom: "If it is important, say less, not more." You will probably be amazed at the results.

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