

The Family

Den of Turmoil or Tranquility?

by

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Who doesn't dream of coming home everyday to a family where conflict is unheard of, hostilities are taboo, and mutual respect is the mantra by which each member lives? Heck, most would pursue one solitary moment of family peace as zealously as a Silas Mariner thirsts for a drop of precious water. But it seems so rare and hard won, doesn't it? Some of us react by retreating to our caves, whether they're mental or physical. For instance, the moment they come home from school, many kids beat a path to their rooms, closed doors and chest-pounding music shielding them from imminent antagonism. After work, the parents either find refuge in the den behind the latest edition of Newsweek or seek haven in the kitchen protected by an apron and oven mitts.

What would you say if I told you these defensive maneuvers are not only unnecessary, they make matters worse? What if I told you that family turmoil *can* be banished forever, giving way to lasting family tranquility—all by changing or eliminating some of the things we say?

Family friction almost always arises from the things we say or don't say, not the things we do or don't do. Many of the phrases that make up our parenting lingo might surprise you, because they seem harmless. Most are ingrained habits handed down from one generation of parents to the next until they've become knee-jerk. But all the harmful phrases I'll address here can change the family milieu from peaceful unity to intolerable battleground by driving children to:

- Feel rotten about themselves

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- Think about how mean and unfair their parents are
- Come up with ways to defend their pride
- Think about anything else, because they're hammered with the same phrases until it's all background noise.

Before we look at some of the remarks that rock the family boat, let's consider some healthier alternatives. All constructive forms of adult/child communication require us to change our role from inflexible dictator or meddling manager to impartial, firm, and supportive guide. As their guides, it's easier to maintain our objectivity. We can therefore see misbehavior as a teachable moment rather than a personal vendetta meant to drive us to an early grave.

Although logical consequences should be our principal discipline tool, non-confrontational remarks are valuable as well. Let's look at the five categories of "peacemaker" phrases:

- **Limited choices (never to be used as a bribe)**
 - If/then: "If you get dressed in time, you'll have more time to watch cartoons before the bus comes."
 - When/then: "When you finish your tantrum, then we can go to the park as we planned."
 - This or that: "It's bedtime. What do you want to do first, take a bath or read a story?"
- **Impartial observations**
 - "I see it's already 6:00, and you haven't started your homework, yet."
- **Objective information**
 - "Our family uses words, not hitting."
 - "It's not safe to run on the dock."
- **"I" messages**
 - "I feel upset when people track mud on the floor I just mopped." (See how I chose to say "people" rather than "you?" This makes the remark even less confrontational, but your feelings are still expressed.)

➤ **Questioning**

“What is our rule about playing with matches?” (The child answers, acknowledging the rule’s existence.) “Why do we have that rule?” (The child answers, reflecting on the rule’s purpose.) “What do you need to do now?” (The child answers, contemplating ways to make amends and keep from making the same mistake in the future.)

When we express these phrases politely and impartially, children don’t see them as accusatory or judgmental. It’s therefore nearly impossible for them to be misinterpreted as a personal attack. So, children feel comfortable objectively considering what we say and taking our words into account in the future. Nothing in these phrases provoke them to react against us or themselves. They’re therefore highly effective in convincing children to comply with our reasonable rules, boundaries, and expectations.

Now that we have the peaceful alternatives, let’s examine those harmful phrases they’ll replace. Remember, though, no phrase packs as effective a punch as the logical consequences children experience for their poor choices.

Remarks That Provoke or Stress

➤ **Negatives like “no,” “don’t,” “stop,” “can’t,” and “quit.”**

Replace “Tommy, stop run around the pool!”

Alternative: “Running around the pool is not safe.”

Example: “No, you can’t have a cookie! It’s suppertime!”

Alternative: “Yes, you can have a cookie *after* you’ve eaten supper.”

➤ **Angry, disrespectful remarks**

Example: “Be quiet!” or “Shut up!”

Alternative: “If you want to be loud, you must go outside.”

Example: “Put that back!”

Alternative: “Our family doesn’t touch things that don’t belong to them.”

➤ **Time crunch remarks**

Example: "Hurry up!"

Alternative: "I see the bus comes in five minutes, and you haven't finished breakfast." (Frankly, I'd take those kids who are ready and pick the dawdlers up later so they get a tardy. I've done this and it works great!)

➤ **Competition encouraging remarks**

"Let's see who can get dressed the quickest!"

Alternative: "The bus comes in five minutes. What do you need to do to get yourself ready?"

Remarks That Judge

These remarks often have our own personal, often negative evaluation attached.

➤ **Criticism/nagging**

Example: "You're hair is a rat's nest. You need to comb it."

Alternatives: It's her hair! Let her wear it as she pleases! She'll suffer a natural consequence if a nest of birds takes up housekeeping in her hair. You can also offer help, "Would you like me to help you brush your hair?"

➤ **Reprimand**

Example: "How dare you talk to me in that tone of voice, Mister!"

Alternative: "You can stay here and speak respectfully, or leave the room."

➤ **Negative comparisons**

Example: "Your sister learned her multiplication tables. Why can't you?"

Alternative: "I'm sorry you're having such a tough time with this. Can I help you?"

In many cases, the natural consequence is probably sufficient.

➤ **Negative labeling**

Example: "You're so clumsy."

Alternative: "I see you spilled the milk. What do you need to do now?" Try to point out what they did right in the task, if possible: "Wow, you got the milk out of the fridge all by yourself!"

➤ **Negative generalizations**

Example: "You *always* forget to do your chores." (Or "You *never* remember to do your chores.")

Alternatives: "I see the trash hasn't been carried out yet," or "I took the trash out for you when I heard the garbage truck coming. I deducted 10 dollars from your allowance to pay for my time." "

➤ **Guilt or shame provoking remarks**

Some of these remarks are punitive, ("I wish you were never born,") while others address the child personally, rather than the behavior, ("You're a bad boy.")

Example: "I'm so disappointed in you for making your sister cry." (Shame)

Alternatives: "Our family treats others kindly. You can play with your sister again when you've taken care of her feelings."

Example: "If you loved me, you'd try harder in school." (Guilt)

Alternative: "You seem to be having trouble in math. Is there anything I can do to help?"

➤ **Words of martyrdom**

Example: "Fine, I'll make your school lunch. I guess I'm everyone's personal slave here!"

Alternative: "That is a task you can do on your own, Bobby. You can either pack your own lunch or skip lunch tomorrow. It's up to you."

Remarks That Show Conditional Love and Acceptance

➤ **Love qualifiers**

Examples: "I love you but..." "I love you if..." "I love you when..."

Alternative: Avoid using but, if or when in the same statement expressing love or affection.

➤ **Apology qualifiers**

Examples: "I'm sorry I spanked you, but I hate when you interrupt me!"

Alternative: Let the apology stand alone. Qualifiers completely negate apologies.

➤ **Demanding reciprocity**

Example: "After I spent all that money on birthday presents for you, the least you

could do is treat your brother nicely.”

Alternative: Disconnect the good deeds you do from your expectations for your children’s behavior. In this case, if Johnny is pinching his brother, he shouldn’t be allowed to play with him until he’s ready to make better choices.

Remarks That Tell Kids What to Think and Do

➤ **Thought indoctrination (telling them what they should be thinking)**

Example: “Don’t be ridiculous, you don’t hate your sister!”

Alternative: “I’m sorry to see you not getting along with your sister, but I’m sure you two will find a way to work out your differences.”

➤ **Invalidating**

Example: “No it isn’t a boring movie.”

Alternative: “What did you find boring about the movie?”

Example: “You don’t/won’t understand.”

Alternative: “Let me explain how I feel about that.”

➤ **Stating opinions as fact**

Example: “People that pierce their noses are just no good punks who probably do drugs.”

Alternative: Express opinions with “I” messages: “I don’t like the idea of nose piercing or any other form of self-mutilation. I’d be afraid of future regrets and the risks of infection and other complications. What is your opinion?”

Remarks That Control and Dominate

➤ **Directives (Telling kids what to do, whether in anger or calmly)**

Example: “Erik, go get your jacket.”

Alternative: “Erik, it’s 20 degrees out. What do you need to do to be comfortable at school today, Sweetie?”

➤ **Threats (real and idle,) ultimatums and overly oppressive punishments**

Example: “If you don’t quit your crying, they’ll be no birthday party.”

Alternative: “When you stop crying, then we can continue discussing party plans.”

➤ **Imposing authority/superiority**

Example: "Because I'm the boss, that's why!"

Alternatives: Any of the five remark techniques will work here, depending on the misbehavior. For instance, if the child is questioning why he should help set the table, you can say, "Because in our family, we all help each other out."

➤ **Stating illogical punishments**

Example: "Young man, I want you to write 'I will not rip the heads of my sister's Barbie Dolls' 100 times on a sheet of paper!"

Alternative: "You will need to replace the doll you destroyed. Get your wallet and we'll drive to the toy store and buy your sister a new one."

Wimpy and Confusing

➤ **Asking permission to discipline**

Example: Anything that ends in "okay?" or "alright?" like, "Stop stalling and take your bath, okay?"

Alternative: "If you take your bath now, we'll have enough time for a bedtime story."

➤ **Negotiating, explaining, lecturing, pleading, etc.**

Examples: Hey, we've all done it, so no need for examples. Anything that leaves our children with a glazed-over look in their eyes probably fits this category.

Alternatives: Use the tools discussed earlier: objective information, logical consequences, limited choices, impartial observations, etc.

➤ **Bailout remarks**

Examples: "Okay, I'm going to give you one more chance, but you better not start complaining again!" "Fine, I'll help write your book report, but I don't want any more procrastinating again, Susie." "Okay, just one more chance!"

Alternative: Stick to your guns and allow them to experience the consequence they've earned.

As you can see, most of these suggestions involve *removing* rather than *adding* things to our already overflowing plate. Relying on consequences rather than diatribes and judgments means delegating more responsibility to children to grow up well. That

said, parenting becomes less labor intensive. And when we replace phrases that bring about emotionally exhausting power struggles with ones that keep the peace, raising children becomes a joy rather than a burden.

Soon, we'll begin to develop faith in our children to overcome hardship, conquer challenges, tolerate frustration, settle conflicts, make difficult choices, handle consequences, and manage responsibilities. This faith helps us forge an optimistic view of their future and encourages them to develop the resilience, independence, and self-confidence necessary to building character. Don't just take my word for it. Take the challenge. For the next few weeks,

- Eliminate all directives.
- Eliminate all negatives.
- Use respectfully delivered logical consequences as your primary form of discipline.

In no time, you'll witness miracles unfolding. One by one, everyone will venture out of their little caves to build relationships based on respect, understanding, and love until the family gains immeasurable strength and unity from its newfound sense of harmony. And when this harmony spreads from family to family, like a ripple in a pond, it will also spread from community to community, from coast to coast, from country to country. See what we're all becoming a part of now?