

When We Take Our Home to Work

By

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Most adults devote an enormous amount of time and energy to work *and* family, making both domains potential sources of stress. Socioeconomic trends have reshaped the corporate agenda to live and die by these words: Be economically competitive or drown in a sea of red ink. So, many businesses are increasing employee work demands while reducing their job security. Add that to our fickle, often merciless economy and the media and pop culture propaganda that insists we all have a certain image and net worth, and it's no wonder many moms and dads must both contribute to the family coffers. But, in that dual career household, juggling family and work responsibilities becomes a day-to-day struggle that many of us discover is more than we can bear.

When the demands at work stress us so much that we can't fulfill our parenting duties properly, our children feel neglected. Worse yet, our inconsistent discipline gives them the chutzpah necessary to overthrow our monarchy in an ugly coup. Some of us react by seeking refuge in the nearest corner to assume the fetal position and suck our thumbs. Others resort to authoritarian strong-arm tactics that only encourage resentment and rebellion among the troops. In any case, we become the chauffeur, the scapegoat, the sucker who can't say no, the unpopular tyrant or all of the above.

And there's more. Because of the increasing responsibilities at both work and home, life often seems stuck on fast forward. Quality time with either child or spouse nears extinction, which plunges both parenting and marital satisfaction to new depths.

This family turmoil then infects our careers by eroding our job satisfaction, productivity and morale. And although this spillover of family conflict to the workplace may cost *us* our emotional sanity, it also translates into huge monetary losses for businesses. The New York Group on Health estimates that stress costs employers \$75 to 80 billion annually in absenteeism, turnover, lost productivity and health and disability claims.

Since we can't petition the time gods for an extra 7 hours each day or plug ourselves into a wall socket for a rapid recharge, have we any recourse? Or is this just reality—the Mommy and Daddy Hell that is our sad fate? Thankfully, there is a way out...a lifeline that can drag us from that smothering mire. Making the decision to grab that line is crucial—not only to our *own* wellbeing, but to that of our workplace and our children. And the good news is that it only takes a few simple tweaks in the way we talk to our kids. That's right. Our lips are the Messiah that can bring salvation to our families, our workplace and our own lives.

Our parent-child communication is, without a doubt, the strongest determinant in whether the family environment is harmonious or hostile. Some of the things we say instill peace, while others breed friction. Many of the harmful remarks I'm going to point out might surprise you, because at first glance, they appear perfectly fine. That's because they've been handed down from one generation of parents to the next until they've become so reflexive that we're no longer aware of the negative impact they have. But all of them can change the family milieu from peaceful sanctuary to insufferable battleground.

Constructive parenting language involves changing our role from dictator, judge, manager or slave to impartial and nurturing guide. This new job description makes it easier for us to remain objective—to look upon any 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 phrases are valuable as well. Let's look at the five categories of "peacemaker" remarks:

➤ **Limited choices (never to be used as a bribe or threat)**

If/then: *"If you can get ready for school in thirty minutes, you'll have more time to watch TV before the bus comes."*

When/then: *"When you finish your homework, then we can go to the mall as we planned."*

This or that: *"I need help with dinner. What do you want to do, make the potatoes or grill the chicken?"*

➤ **Impartial observations**

"I see it's already 6:00, and you haven't started your homework, yet."

➤ **Objective information**

"Our family believes in telling the truth."

"It's not safe to stay out past curfew."

➤ **"I" messages**

"I feel upset when people track mud on the floor I just mopped."

➤ **Questioning**

"What is our rule about going places without telling us first?" "Why do we have that rule?" "How do you plan to help yourself remember that rule?" "What do you think would be a reasonable consequence for breaking that rule in the future?" Of course the child is given a chance to answer each question.

When expressed politely, these remarks are free of finger-pointing or judgment-passing. So rather than retaliate or defend themselves against a personal attack, our kids feel comfortable reflecting on our words and learning the valuable lessons they represent. Consequently, this kinder, softer approach is actually *more* effective in bringing about desirable behaviors and extinguishing undesirable ones than some of the harsher tactics we might have in our parenting repertoire.

Now let's examine how these healthier remarks can be used to replace the harmful ones so deeply rooted in our parenting culture:

Remarks That Provoke or Stress

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

Example: *“Tommy, stop playing the music so loud!”*

Alternatives: *“When the music is so loud, the other kids can’t concentrate on their homework.”* If he refuses, remove his speaker and say in a polite voice: *“Tommy, I’m sorry you chose to break our rule against playing the music loudly in the house.”*

Example: *“No, you can’t have ice cream now! It’s suppertime!”*

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

➤ **Angry, disrespectful remarks**

Example: *“Be quiet!”* or *“Shut up!”*

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

Example: *“Put that back!”*

Alternatives: *“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.”*

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.”*

Alternative: *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!”*

Alternatives: *“You can stay here and speak respectfully, or leave the room.” “Our family speaks in a respectful tone to others.”*

➤ **Negative comparisons**

Example: *“Your sister makes good grades. Why can’t you?”*

Alternative: *“I’m sorry you’re having such a tough time with this. How can I help you?”*

In many cases, the natural consequence is probably sufficient.

➤ **Negative labeling**

Example: *“You’re so careless! I can’t believe tipped over an entire bucket of paint!”*

Alternative: *“I see you spilled some paint. Let me know if you need any help cleaning it up.”* Try to point out what they did right in the task, if possible: *“Wow, look how much of your room you’ve painted already. And I really like the color you chose!”*

➤ **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.” “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 algebra. 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!”*

Alternatives: *“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 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?"*

➤ **Stating opinions as fact**

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

Alternative: Make sure you express your opinions with an "I" message, then ask their opinion: *"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 clean your room, you're grounded for a month."*

Alternative: In our house, every Sunday I announce that in one hour, I'm going into their bedrooms with a trash bag picking up anything not properly put away, and taking it to a shelter as a donation. (And I do!)

➤ **Imposing 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 teen is questioning why he should help set the table, you can say, *"Because in our family, we all help each other out."* You can also say, *"You don't have to. That's your decision. But only those sharing a task can reap its rewards."*

➤ **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!"*

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

Although this just scratches the surface, it's a good start. By relying on consequences rather than diatribes we delegate more responsibility to our children to grow up properly. This makes our job less labor intensive. And when we replace remarks that bring about emotionally draining power struggles with ones that keep the peace, parenting becomes an enriching experience rather than a necessary evil. Once you incorporate some of these changes into your parent/child communication, you'll experience a newfound sense of strength and harmony in your family within a few weeks. This transformation will then inspire many positive changes in your career: increased effectiveness and job performance, richer relationships with others in the workplace, whether co-worker or management, and a deeper sense of job satisfaction and confidence. That said, you'll gain an unprecedented sense of personal fulfillment in all areas of life. In the end, isn't that the coveted treasure we all seek?