

# 10 Things You Should Never Say to Your Kids

Find out which commonly used phrases often end up doing more harm than good

By [Denise Schipani](#) Posted October 06, 2011 from [WomansDay.com](#)

There are a handful of obviously wrong, damaging and terrible things to say to a child ("I wish I never had you" or "You're the reason we're getting a divorce" count among them). But it may surprise you to discover that some seemingly harmless phrases can trigger resentment, dent self-esteem or bring up other less-than-desirable sentiments in your kids. Amy McCready, founder of [Positive Parenting Solutions](#) and author of *If I Have to Tell You One More Time...*, notes, "We have the best of intentions, but often we say things to our kids without thought to how it's being perceived by the child." Here, 10 phrases you should think twice about before repeating to your kids.

## 1. "I know you can try harder."

Frustrated by a daughter who you know is capable of much more in school, sports, music, etc.? While you (hopefully!) aren't saying such obviously hurtful things as "You are so lazy!", any comment that makes it seem as though you're not satisfied with her efforts can not only be discouraging to your child, it can also do the opposite of motivating her to try harder, says McCready. If your "try harder" has to do with tasks or chores, be clear about what you expect: "When you have your room cleaned up, then you can go out and play." If you're talking about academics, "take note of times she does go the extra mile," such as: "Wow! That extra time spent on your book report really shows!"

## 2. "Are you sure you need that second cupcake?"

Yikes. You have good intentions—keeping your child fit and healthy—but you're better off steering clear of any talk that might foster a negative body image, says McCready. If you're worried about what your child eats at home, use actions, not words, such as stocking your kitchen with healthy foods rather than junk and emphasizing family physical activity like after-dinner walks. That way, if there are cupcakes at a party, your child's fine to indulge. And walk the walk yourself; you mix your message if you tell your kid to keep his hands out of the cookie jar while you're inhaling potato chips. Incidentally, the same goes for telling your child that he's a "great" eater; try to avoid labels (he's my picky child; she's such an adventurous eater; this one needs to stay away from treats) because "you never want to turn food into a power issue," says McCready. As best you can, keep food-related comments specific and positive: "Wow, I see you tried the squash soup!"

## 3. "You always..." or "You never..."

Undeniably, it's tempting—almost a reflex at times—to spit out an always ("You always forget to put your socks in the hamper!") or a never ("You never remember to call me when you're running late!"). But be careful because those two words are a minefield, says Jenn Berman, PhD, a psychotherapist and author of *The A to Z Guide to Raising Happy, Confident Kids*. "At the heart of 'You always' and 'You never' statements are labels that can stick for life." Kids become what we tell them they are, so telling your child that he "always" forgets to call makes him more likely to be the kid who, you guessed it, never calls. Instead, ask your child how you can help him or her change: "I notice you seem to have trouble remembering to bring home your textbooks. What can we do to try to help you remember?" suggests Dr. Berman.



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#### **4. "Why can't you be more like your sister/brother?"**

Siblings and rivalry go hand in hand—and anything you say that sets up comparisons only fuels that natural flame, says McCready. If you're saying, for example, "Your brother is practicing piano and he sounds great—why can't you do that?" you're essentially telling your child that piano is his brother's thing, and he's not measuring up. "Comparisons slot siblings into categories—the smart one, the athlete—and discourage kids from trying the thing their sibling is 'good' at." Try instead to encourage each child in whatever pursuits are "his" or "hers," while avoiding comparisons.

#### **5. "I told you waiting until the last minute was a mistake!"**

You repeatedly informed your middle-schooler that if he played video games all afternoon, he'd have less time to study for the math test. And guess what? He stayed up too late, went to school sleepy and unprepared, and didn't do as well as he could have on the exam. But any time you say "I told you so" to your child, you're in effect telling him you're always right, and by contrast he's often wrong or a screw-up, says McCready. When he comes home with the poor grade, resist the "I told you so" urge and instead ask him if the two of you could brainstorm some smarter ways to study the next time. Also, "point out the positives that occur when he does follow through," says McCready. For example, if he cleans up his room when asked, saying "Isn't it easier to find all your stuff when your room's tidy?" puts the control and the credit with him—not you.

#### **6. "You're the best at soccer!"**

It may seem obvious that denigrating your child's efforts ("You're no artist!") can be damaging, but in fact, even the positive pronouncements can be bad because they are limiting, says McCready. "Say you always tell your child how smart she is. She may, over time, become scared of trying new things or more challenging work, for fear she won't be 'smart' anymore if she gets a B instead of an A." It can also backfire if your child is struggling with work and you say, "But you're so smart!" She may only feel worse for not living up to the label you've given her. But what if your child is not a great soccer player? If she enjoys it, that's enough. But if she feels she's not good at it, she may be less likely to try a different sport later on, says McCready. Focus instead on her hard work: "You show up to every practice and try your best," or "What a fantastic job on this science project!"

#### **7. "Don't worry—the first day of school will be fine."**

What's wrong with trying to soothe an anxious kid out of worry? "If you tell your child not to worry, you're dismissing her feelings," says Dr. Berman. "So now, she's still worried about the first day of school, and she's worried that she's worried, or that you're upset over her worry." Same goes for "Don't cry" and "Don't be angry." Instead, say, "I can see you're worried. Can you tell me what you're most concerned about, so we can talk about it?"

#### **8. "Because I said so!"**

We've all been there—you just need to get out the door and you don't have time to explain why you need to switch off the computer and head to a family event/doctor's appointment/religious obligation. "Because I said so," puts all the control in your hands, and dismisses your child's growing sense of autonomy and ability to figure things out, says Dr. Berman. "Because I said so" also leaves out a potential teaching moment. Let's say your kids don't want to visit their aging great-aunt on a sunny day when they'd rather ride their bikes. "Because I said so" only makes them feel less in control of what they are able to do. Instead, try, "I know you'd rather ride your bike, but Aunt Clara really loves seeing you, and we try our best to honor our family." That way, even if they continue to grumble, they know their feelings matter; plus, they've learned a valuable lesson about how you conduct yourselves as a family.

#### **9. "I wish you didn't hang out with Jack; I don't like that kid."**

Yeah, a lot of parents don't like "that kid," for whatever reason, but "the moment you tell your child that 'that kid' is not your favorite, he becomes more appealing," says Dr. Berman. Evaluate, first, what you don't like about Jack. Is he just not your cup of tea, or does he present some sort of danger you don't want your child exposed to? If it's the former, grit your teeth. If it's the latter, though, "Ask your child some open-ended questions," says Dr. Berman. "What do you like about hanging out with Jack? What do you guys do?" The idea is to keep the lines of communication open between you two, and hopefully spark discussion about values, right and wrong, and so on.

#### **10. "That's not how you do it! Here, let me."**

You asked your child to stir the soup, or fold the towels, or wash the car. Sure, you want the help—but then she kind of does a not-so-great job. Depending on how much of a perfectionist you are, it can be tough to hold yourself back from just jumping in and taking the task back, “But that’s a mistake, because then she never learns how, and is less likely to try anything else you ask down the line,” says Dr. Berman. If you can stand messy folding or a less than clean car, let it go. Or, you can step in but in a collaborative rather than dismissive way: “Here, let me show you a neat trick my mom taught me about folding towels!”