

# The Words That Really Work with Kids

By Paul W. Schenk, Psy.D.



The Parent's Answer Book

**I**t's 9:30 P.M. on a weeknight and your 10-year-old daughter is still awake. She knows it's past her bedtime, but she's determined to stay up and watch television. Which of the following statements do you think would finally get her under the covers?

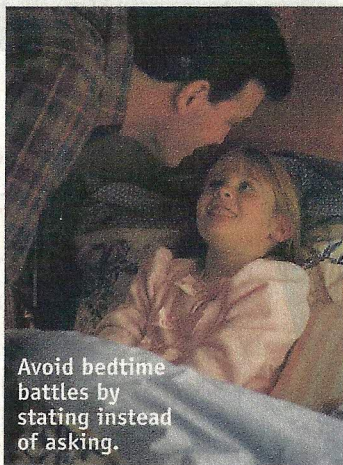
- Honey, it's time for bed now, O.K.?
- Don't watch any more television.
- You should have been in bed 30 minutes ago.
- You never go to bed when you're supposed to.

Actually, none of these statements is likely to work because each one is a "language trap." While they may sound reasonable to you, a 10-year-old will hear them quite differently. Why? Because children this age have a specific way of thinking and listening, and unfortunately, it's often at odds with how parents talk. To get your kids to do what you ask, you have to speak their language.

As a clinical psychologist who has worked with many families over the years, I've come to recognize a number of language traps that undermine good communication between parents and children. Four of the most common are the use of the words *O.K.*, *don't*, and *should*, and absolutes such as *always* and *never*.

When you use these words, it can sound like finger-nails on a chalkboard to kids—it's so grating, they tune out. Or they end up doing the opposite of what you wanted. The problem is primarily a developmental one. From ages 4 to 11, children go through an extended stage of "concrete thinking," which is characterized by understanding the world around them in black-and-white terms. They learn and think literally, and have much less ability to deal with subtleties or abstract concepts. When parents fall

into language traps, it routinely triggers behaviors in kids that seem argumentative or oppositional. The good news is that each trap is easy to avoid if you change your communication style to fit that of your child. Once the two of you are on the same page, he'll be more cooperative because he'll understand what you really want.



Avoid bedtime battles by stating instead of asking.

who'll think *Yes*. Most kids think, *No way!* and put off doing what mom wants them to do. A common variation on this is "would you": "Would you like to help set the table?" Care to predict the answer most kids will give?

## Trap #1—O.K.

The word *O.K.* is a favorite of moms who commonly use it to end a request: "Take out the trash, O.K.?" But remember, kids this age think literally. So the child's brain hears, "Do you want to take out the trash?" It is the rare child

The use of the words *O.K.* and *would you* tells your child that she has a choice, which I'm sure is not what you mean. Children get angry at what I call "pseudo-democracy" situations like this. Yet few are brave enough to say what they're thinking: "Why did you ask me for my opinion if you've already made up your mind?"

When the behavior requested of your child is mandatory and not optional, don't turn the statement into a question. Simply leave off the word *O.K.* Just say, "It's time for bed." "Please come help set the table." Or you can substitute a different word for *O.K.* For instance, "It's time for bed, understand?" It's much easier for a child to answer yes to this question as it no longer asks for his consent, but it does invite his cooperation.

## Trap #2—Don't

"Susan, don't forget to bring home your science book." "John, don't be late for the bus." Sound ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶

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Take a straight-forward approach and you won't get an argument over chores.

Photos: The Stock Market (top); Scott Barrow (bottom).





“CHILDREN THINK IN TERMS OF BLACK AND WHITE. THEY TAKE WHAT YOU SAY LITERALLY.”

From page 52

familiar? These reminders, and others like them, come with the good intention of helping a child avoid a problem. So why is it that Susan is still likely to forget her science book and John may miss the bus?

The brain is incapable of generating a picture of *don't*. It can create images only of what it is thinking about at the moment. It's similar to the way you'd process a NO SMOKING sign—a cigarette in a circle with a red line through it. When you use the word *don't*, you're telling your child's brain to first create an image of the thing she is not supposed to do. Only then can her brain put the verbal equivalent of that red line over the idea. The real message your child hears is akin to the way children sometimes talk: Forget your science book, *not*. Be late for the bus, *not*. Therein lies the problem. When children hear “don't,” the first image they see in their mind's eye is the exact opposite of the behavior you want, and many of them stop right there. They never quite make it to the *not* part.

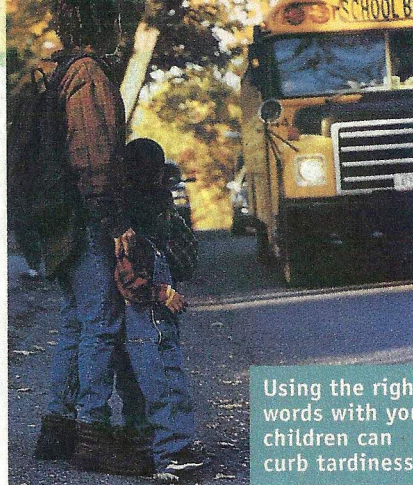
Instead of saying what you *don't* want, say what you *do* want. “Susan, remember to bring home your science book today.” “John, please get to the

bus stop on time.” Your child's brain will then automatically develop a picture of the behavior just described—the behavior you want.

### Trap #3—Should

*Should* language is commonly used to teach children values and social expectations. “You should have done your chores by now.” “You shouldn't hit your brother.” However, *shoulds* rarely produce the intended result. Instead, they typically lead to guilt or resentment. If your child doesn't do what you say should be done, he feels guilty. Yet if he does do it, he tends to feel resentful toward you. Neither result strengthens your bond. *Should* language can also lead to parental resentment. Say you expect your daughter to clean the cat's litter box without being reminded. When she doesn't do so, you may feel resentful toward her. Each time you use *should*, you stress your relationship with your child.

Turn this around by substituting *I want* for *you should*. Instead of “You should help clear the table,” try “I want you to help clear the table.” Rather than “You should have finished your homework by now,” say, “I



Using the right words with your children can curb tardiness.

want you to start studying earlier.” This straightforward approach eliminates the guilt and resentment.

### Trap #4—Absolutes

“You never do your chores.” “You're always watching TV.” “Nobody listens to a word I say around here!” To the young child who listens literally, these sentences imply situations with absolutely no exceptions. The problem with absolute words again stems from concrete thinking. The child's brain listens literally to the sentence to determine if it is true or false. For example, “You never hang up your coat.” If your son has hung up his coat even once, then the accusation is false and he'll promptly point out at least one exception. From there the conversation evolves into an argument about percentages and your goal to have your son hang up his coat more often is lost.

Absolute words such as *never*, *ever*, *always*, *everybody* and *nobody* literally mean that there is not a single exception. Few children are that consistent. To avoid an argument over the exceptions, replace the absolute word with words like *rarely*, *infrequently*, *often*, *usually*, *most*, *a lot*, *few*, *some* and *a little*. These terms allow for a gray area. More important, you can focus on the solution rather than the problem. For example, instead of saying, “You never hang up your coat,” you can say, “I would like you to hang up your coat more often.”

Changing the way you communicate with your child will be easier once you train your ears to listen for these four language traps. As you learn to convey more clearly to your child what you really want, you'll find that you have much less friction and a lot more cooperation. ■

Photo, Scott Barrow.

## TALKING THEIR TALK

Since school-age children think and listen in black-and-white terms, it helps to communicate with them literally. The key is to avoid using words and phrases that kids' brains might misconstrue. Here are a few common traps and their remedies.

WHEN YOU SAY:	YOUR CHILD REALLY HEARS/THINKS:	INSTEAD, SAY:
You're always watching TV.	Yeah, right. I never do anything else. There you go exaggerating again.	I would like you to spend more time (reading, playing, etc.).
Don't forget to bring your math book home.	Forget my math book—not.	Please remember to bring your math book home today.
Put away your laundry after dinner, O.K.?	Is there anything else I'd rather do right after dinner? Sure is!	Please put your laundry away after dinner.
Would you like to go clothes shopping after school?	You mean instead of playing and hanging out with my friends?	I will be taking you clothes shopping after school.
You never turn off the lights when you leave a room.	That's not true. I turned out the bathroom light last night.	Please remember to turn off the lights more often when you leave a room.