

Snow White Doesn't Live Here Anymore

Laughter, pleasure, malice, and the pursuit of adult fun
by Regina Barreca, Ph.D.

How Should You Talk To Your Kids?

Speak to kids like people, not as if they have just landed from Planet Childhood
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Books about how to deal with your children are as numerous as books on how to lose weight, eat well, exercise while not moving, live happily while getting your way, and contact space aliens in order to sell them your homemade products-- and they are just about as effective.

Every hour produces a new crop of them.

For children, we get the "All positive reinforcement all the time" strategy, which ranks up there with the Gluten-Free, Lactose-Lite, All-Raw-Food [Diet](#).

We get the "Homework Kills" school of thought, just as we hear that the intake of any nut product (I'm being literal here) will not only shorten your lifespan but increase your time in purgatory.

We are bombarded with statistics convincing us to abandon such fiercely competitive practices as tic-tac-toe and hopscotch for [fear](#) of causing permanent damage to those children who might be in danger of suffering from [narcissistic personality disorder](#) brought on by insufficient exposure to Mozart while *in utero*. But then of course we are also told that a diet composed exclusively of, say, surgical tape and lima beans will get us into those size 2 dresses in no time.

Obviously, we're getting what can be called--if you insist on being polite-- conflicting information.

I came across an article entitled "Words to Inspire: Things to say to your Kids—and Things not to Say." It prompted me to consider these issues in detail.

"Okay," I thought, "here's a new set of inspirational maxims for my educational philosophy! Surely I can learn what to say and what to avoid saying!" I'm always interested in learning what I should and should not say to those children who inadvertently cross my path, and I felt certain that I'd benefit from reading the essay.

I was also, naturally, interested in comparing any new strategies for dealing with children to those methodologies prevalent during my own youth.

It's this last set of comparisons that made me [laugh](#) so hard I spilled my coffee (a beverage in which I take dairy-based products, thus increasing my already lengthy stay you-know-where).

The article makes several points with which I don't disagree, but it also makes me nervous: must we really speak to children the way that people speak to their enemies: with great caution, diplomacy, and a meticulous attention to the possible effects of nuanced interpretation?

I mean, I think we should be kind to people—I'm all for that—but I also don't think that we need to speak to people under five as if they're being followed closely by their attorney.

Maybe it's just me, but doesn't that cut down on the possibility for any sort of genuine connection?

The article is, more or less, based on the following idea, one I believe can indeed be useful in many situations: kids don't always hear what you think you're saying. Fair enough. The article offers "common phrases" and suggests "alternatives to get your message across in a better way."

For example: "What you say: 'Make sure you share.'" Then they offer a sort of translation into kid-speak: "What they hear: 'Give away your stuff.'"

The article then suggests a version that might be easier for the child to absorb: "A better way to say it: 'Jesse would like to play with your race car for a while, but it's still yours and he will give it back.'"

Okay, I'm sold—small children need to understand that sharing isn't the same thing as loss (although it is a lesson grown-ups need to re-learn when it comes to issues surrounding fidelity, but that's a subject for another column...).

The most glaring departure from my own life experience was illuminated by the following example:

"What you say: 'We can't afford that.'

What they hear: 'Money is the answer to everything.'

A better way to say it: 'The store is filled with great things today, but we've got lots at home already and we're not going to bring home anything more.'"

When my mother told me, “We can’t afford that,” what I “heard” was that my mom was being really, really polite that day.

What she really wanted to say was “Are you kidding? That Barbie Fun Kitchen Set costs what your Dad brought home for his paycheck last week and if you think your skinny little doll is getting nicer dishes than the ones we’ve used for the last ten years, you’re crazy.”

Plus, if for some inexplicable reason my mother *had* launched into a discourse on how the store was filled with great things but how we also had lots of great things at home, I would have run screaming to the nearest stranger and begged for help.

That simply wasn’t how moms talked to their kids. If she’d used all those weirdly false phrases, she would have sounded like she was reciting a piece of dialogue from *The Twilight Zone*.

Look, I’m happy that [parents](#) and teachers, aunts and coaches, crossing guards and uncles, school-nurses and neighbors are eager to cultivate capable, curious, content, and cheerful children.

I just don’t think we need to speak to them in slow earnest voices, with falsely reassuring smiles, and without blinking to get across the point that we care, that we want to listen, and that we, too, want to learn.

Let’s speak to children as if they are people.

EXPERTS



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