

Sticks and Stones ... and Words That Hurt

You've heard the old saying... "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me". Who wrote that? Someone who knew nothing about the psychological health of a child, that's for sure. "Geek", "Nerd", and "Idiot" are, unfortunately, some of the least offensive names that kids are regularly called by their peers. Being hit with words by classmates is bad enough, but when a child hears, "You stupid child" or "You spoiled brat" from a parent, the words can cause far more damage than being hit by any stick or stone.

In my work as a psychologist, I can't recall any parent telling me they don't love their child. Most parents don't intentionally physically or emotionally harm their children, either. Yet many parents think nothing of using words that strike their child's psyche as painfully as if the child had been physically beaten.

I worked for a time as a consultant for local daycare programs. Day after day I was shocked when the first thing out of a parent's mouth when they came to pick up their child at the end of the day was, "I know you were bad today, weren't you? You were bad". These parents, I knew, loved their children and did not intend to damage their child's self esteem. Yet that is exactly what was happening.

So many parents need education about the cognitive and emotional development of children. They take their kids to the pediatrician and become informed about their physical development. Yet that is but one area of the child's growth. But by no means is the child's physical growth any more important than the child's cognitive and emotional growth. How successful is a healthy, full-grown person whose psychological development was ignored? (Look around at the majority of the adults you know and you'll have a fairly good idea).

When a child hears, "You're bad" – or any variation of that message - on a consistent basis, he starts thinking that he is bad. That is no different from the battered spouse who starts to believe that "No one will ever love you like I do" after hearing it time after time from her abuser. It takes a child very little time to internalize negative messages. The child, whose thinking is concrete (meaning he takes things very literally), only knows that his mom or dad is telling him that he is a bad child. It's that simple. If a child hears that she is "bad" or "lazy" or "stupid", she believes it. For real. Just watch the face of little Jimmy or Felicia when those words are directed at him or her. He will look at the floor in shame. She will look with confusion into the face of her parent. Those little people believe what you say about them. Mean words hurt them. Cruel words damage them.

Children do learn what they live. The incredible poem by that same name, written by Dorothy Law Nolte, says, in part:

"If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn...
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy...
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty...
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal."

You may be thinking, "Yeah, they know I don't mean it. 'You're bad' is just an expression. They know I love them". It's not true! They DON'T know you're just kidding. They may know you love them because of the good things you do and say to them; that part is true. The whole truth, however, is that kids who are called names or physically hit (yes, that includes spanking) get mixed messages about how you feel about them. In other words, they think, "My mommy and daddy love me ... but sometimes they don't love me because they tell me I'm bad and they hit me". It's that simple. If you are arguing with me thinking things like, "I turned out all right and my

parents screamed at me or spanked me or... “ whatever negative thing they did at times, it indicates that you are rationalizing or justifying the negative things that happened to you so that you don't have to acknowledged the pain you feel about those things.

Yes - your child will survive if you have, like most parents – engaged in some negative parenting practices – most of us do! They will very likely turn out “fine”. How about instead, that they turn out fabulous and completely certain, without a doubt, about your absolute joy about their being?

Think how much better our adult society would be like if every children had parents who raised them *with good boundaries, positive discipline* (yes, they do need clear boundaries and non-physical discipline) and **most importantly**, the message, “*You are absolutely the greatest, most precious thing to ever happen in my world. You are treasured and loved every day for ever more*”.

The world would have adults who didn't need to get their worth affirmed in the negative ways that so many of us who “endured *whatever* and turned out *just fine*” do. We become workaholics in the hope of being affirmed. We turn to alcohol or food or drugs or sex or shopping or gambling to numb ourselves to our feelings. We get married and divorced and married and divorced again, seeking the “unconditional love” we needed from our parents. We have extra-marital affairs because we don't feel good enough about ourselves but complain that we don't “get what we need” from our partners. We buy every brand name product on the market so people think we have it all. If they could only see our emotional insides...

Do your part in helping the next generations to raise children who have solid knowledge that they are loved! Tell them! Now! It's never too late to hear how much your parent loves you! Hearing it from you also gives them permission to, and an example of how to do the same for their children! Hearing positive messages from our parents is one of the most important ways a person develops positive self-esteem.

Sticks, stones, **and words** hurt. Words can also heal! Tell your children that you love them. Over and over. NOW! Thank you! †

Children Learn What They Live By Dorothy Law Nolte, Ph.D.

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.
If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.
If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.
If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.