

C2

Words Can Hurt: Teaching Kids Better Ways to Express Anger

Kids with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) or other learning disabilities (LD) may verbalize angry feelings inappropriately, resorting to swear words, name-calling, and hurtful remarks. This doesn't necessarily mean they're "bad" kids. Consider what the child may be struggling with:

- Tim, who has AD/HD, is easily frustrated and has poor impulse control. He often blurts out an angry retort before he can stop and think about what he's about to say.
- Pam has LD involving language difficulties. She may struggle to find and express the words she needs to communicate. She grows more frustrated and lashes out with whatever words she can spit out. Some of those words may be hurtful.

It's helpful for parents to view such outbursts as behaviors that can be changed. There are steps you can take to coach your child to express himself appropriately. Understanding your child's individual challenges and focusing on positive behaviors are the keys.

Understanding Replacement Behaviors

Like most adults, you probably know what it's like to break your own unhealthy habits (behaviors). Have you noticed that it's easier to squelch an unhealthy habit when you substitute it with a healthier alternative that gives you similar satisfaction? For example, someone who wants to quit smoking might find it easier to resist the urge to smoke if he chews sugarless gum instead. This is the essence of behavior management training. And the same technique can work for kids.

Buying into Behavior Change

The most successful behavior change occurs when the child has input and understands the benefits of learning more positive behaviors. Here are some tips to help your child "buy into" the process:

- If your child struggles with more than one unacceptable behavior, you and he should decide which one to tackle first. Will you focus on the most offensive behavior — the one that gets him into the most trouble (such as swearing at adults)? Or will you zoom in on a behavior that's easier to change (such as calling the dog "stupid"). Keep in mind that his success in changing one behavior may motivate him to improve in other areas.
- Help him understand the benefits of changing his behavior. He's probably well aware of why his outbursts are a problem. Instead, tell him how expressing his feelings in a less offensive way will improve his relationships with other people.
- Assure him there's no need to ignore or repress his angry feelings; the goal is simply to express his feelings in a more acceptable way.

Knowing What Triggers the Behavior

An important step in changing behavior is figuring out what situations precede your child's inappropriate behavior. By observing your child just before an outburst and talking with him after the

