

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

“offense,” you can pick up clues. Ask him who or what he’s angry with — You? Someone else? Homework? Loss of a privilege? Himself? Make sure you intervene as soon as he calms down after the outburst so the feelings are fresh in his mind.

Invent hand signals (such as a “time out” signal) or verbal cues and use them to help your child realize he’s getting wound up. In time, he’ll learn to recognize when he’s getting upset.

Finding Replacement Behaviors

It’s best to help your child replace the unacceptable behavior with a more desirable one that still allows him to let off steam. For example, he might substitute swear words with a silly-but-angry retort, like, “Balderdash!” One boy who did this found he couldn’t say the word without laughing, so the replacement behavior diffused his anger as well!

Other replacement behaviors to express anger include punching a pillow, kicking a punching bag, or repeatedly bouncing a ball against an outside wall. Such activities are safe and appropriate and help kids express frustration and anger in a physical way.

Let your child experiment with different replacement behaviors. Make suggestions, but encourage him to come up with his own ideas. Each time he uses a replacement behavior, ask if it made him feel better. He may need to try different methods before finding the solution that works.

Reinforcing Positive Behavior

Give your child an age-appropriate reward (sticker, privilege, or praise) each time he uses effective replacement language or behavior. Point out how his relationships with others are improving because of his new behavior. Specifically, help him see how his new behavior helps him get what he needs, including having others understand him.

Taking Techniques to School

If your child’s outbursts are a problem at school, clue his teacher into the technique you’re using at home. She may be able to employ it (or some version of it) with your child at school. Consistency between home and school leads to greater reinforcement of the desired behavior.

Practicing... with Patience

Be patient as your child practices changing his behavior. It’s normal for kids to backslide from time to time. When he does, don’t overreact; simply intervene and help him get back on track. And as always, help him celebrate — and focus on — his successes.

When to Get Professional Help

If your child’s expression of anger frequently turns into aggression toward people or destruction of property, or if your ongoing attempts to help him control his anger don’t seem to be working, it may be time to get some help from a therapist or counselor. For some children, the common approaches to behavior management are not effective. When this is the case, the sooner you get help to figure out an effective approach, the better. Ask your pediatrician or school psychologist to recommend a therapist.

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About the Contributors



In her role as Writer/Editor for Schwab Learning, **Kristin Stanberry** provides information, insight, strategies, and support for parents whose children have LD and AD/HD. She combines a professional background developing consumer health and wellness publications with her personal experience of coaching family members with learning and behavior problems.

Other Resources

Books

Win the Whining War & Other Skirmishes: A Family Peace Plan

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0962203637/schwabfoundation/>

By Cynthia Whitham, MSW

SOS! Help for Parents: A Practical Guide for Handling Common Everyday Behavior Problems

<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0935111204/qid=1028073648/schwabfoundation/>

By Lynn Clark, Ph.D., John Robb (Illustrator)

The Explosive Child

www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0060931027/schwabfoundation/

By Ross W. Greene, PhD.