



PARENT SENSE BY VICKI CURRAN, EDS, LPC

## Words do hurt, so pay attention

I've recently spent time thinking about how much our children are influenced by the words around them. Because so much of their social world happens through technology, the words they hear and read are processed and pondered more than ever before.

Text messages, social media, music, television, video games — they all expose our children to words that can influence their actions and their beliefs. It made me realize I should be paying more attention to what my kids are hearing.

When I did, what I found is how common and acceptable social bullying is on TV. Characters insult each other, taunt each other and display other forms of nonphysical aggression throughout each episode. So much so that our kids are de-sensitized to it — they don't even recognize it as harmful. Research states there are about 14 incidents

an hour of social aggression in the 50 most watched television shows among 2- to 11-year-olds.

So what does that mean for our children? It means our kids are learning to say hurtful things because they don't think about the impact their words have on other people. It means they truly may not know that some of the things they are saying in an attempt to be funny can actually be hurtful. It means that, if they do know, they think responding with "no offense" or "just kidding" removes the injury.

But "sticks and stones may break my bones" might be one of the greatest lies ever

told. Words hurt. In fact, brain receptors for physical and emotional pain are one and the same. And hurtful words create scars that no one can see. The words we hear repeatedly can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Careless words can shape [or misshape] someone's self-perception for years to come. So how do we, as parents, help our children to learn about the effect our words can have on others?

First, we need to talk with our children about what they are watching. Being there to process situations seen on TV gives us the chance to help kids reflect and em-

pathize. If a character says something unkind, use that as your teaching point. Ask your child: "Why do you think the character said that?" "How do you think the other character felt when they said that?" "Was what they said necessary?" "Was it kind?" "How would you feel if that happened to you?"

Help your kids to think about the impact their own words might have on someone else. Once they get used to analyzing other people's conversations, help your children to understand how their words can affect others. Use "THINK" to help them filter themselves:

- T - "Is it true?"
- H - "Is it helpful?"
- I - "Is it inspiring?"
- N - "Is it necessary?"
- K - "Is it kind?"

The last step is talking with your child about things they have heard or said that may

have been hurtful to someone else. Ask them to think about the children they are in class with. Is there someone they have said things to that they regret? Or is there someone who is not treated very kindly by others? What can they do about it?

If we, as parents, are really clear about our expectations for how our children treat others [including their siblings, their classmates, and "that chubby kid on the bus"], our children will better understand what is hurtful and what is not. We need to let our kids know that the right word spoken at the right time is more powerful than they know.

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For more information or a list of local licensed professionals, contact Coastal Community Counseling Resources at 732-612-3148.