

When a Child Uses Powerful Words that Hurt

Of all the words that bother parents the most, my vote would have to go with the phrase, “I hate you!” I’m talking about the words that occasionally come out of the mouths of our babes when they are angry with us. Many of us were raised with an understanding that the word hate was off limits more than any others. Back when I was young, it didn’t matter how angry I was with my parents, I never considered the option of using that word because I knew there would be extremely heavy consequences if I did. Parents today cringe when they hear that word used against them and it hurts. We were taught by the power it carried, that it was the ultimate in verbal assault on respect.

Let me suggest however, that children do not know what that word means. They say it when they are mad at the parent for not giving in to their demands, or for making changes that they don’t like. When your young child is mad at you, they are expressing that they either love you or hate you; there is nothing in the middle. I encourage parents to not over react when they hear the hate word used against them. I also suggest that when your child says “I hate you,” that you react in a calm voice and simply say, “it looks like you’re mad at me.” This will help redefine the child’s emotion and help them understand what they are really feeling.

What about “potty words,” when your child picks up a bad word he heard somewhere and decides to use it for effect? Imagine this scene; little Johnny is playing in the sandbox at preschool and he hears another little boy say “poo-poo” (I’ll use a mild one here to represent words that are far worse). Little Johnny innocently repeats this new and unfamiliar word a few times because it’s kind of cute and easy to say. There may even be a chance that he’s heard Mommy or Daddy say it and he wants to be more like them, so he tries out the word. Moments later, the teacher hears little Johnny using this word. She’s shocked and scolds him not to say it. He quickly discovers the power of this word because of how it made his teacher respond. Mommy arrives in the afternoon to pick him up. With anticipation and excitement, Johnny decides to try out the word again to see what affect it will have on Mommy. She nearly drives off the road as she hears him announce it from his car seat behind her. Looking in her rearview mirror, she exclaims “we don’t use that word in this family!” and thinks to herself, “my child is out of control and he’s only four!” Or she’s wondering to herself, “What are they teaching him at this school?” Little Johnny is excited about the power this word is giving him by the impact it is having on the adults around him. I might even imagine he is saying to himself, “I’m going to save this powerful word for later... when Grandma comes over to visit!”

It’s common for young children to hear various “potty words” and begin using them against our wishes. What motivates children to use them is the reaction they get from the adults around them. Your child may be feeling small and unimportant and suddenly discovers that using this special word gives them the power to cause you to freak out and over react. Experts tell us that a child may spend up to three months using a new word they’ve heard, but if using it causes Mommy to lose her cool, the child may keep using it far beyond the normal ‘discovery’ period. This gives her the feeling of being powerful and the motivation to turn it into a fun game to play.

Immediately I suggest not over reacting. This will take away much of the motivation for your child to want to keep using the word. Remain calm and avoid fearful thoughts that your child is bad, or worse, that you're a bad parent. Also avoid punishing the child. Many of us can remember having our mouths washed out with soap. Instead, calmly let your child know that you do not like the word and cannot allow anyone in the house to use it. Let them help you come up with a fun word that they can say instead. Because they may test you to see how "real" you are with this new boundary, be ready to lovingly remind them of your rule about the word and make it fun and exciting to use the alternate word instead. Taking this firm and loving approach will teach your child so much more about unconditional love and building respectful boundaries with others.

Although one might not classify this as using a real word, I get stumped with the parents who cannot get past their child communicating like an animal. A woman I met asked me to help her find a solution for her 4 year old daughter constantly barking like a dog. The little girl was even crawling around on all fours. My advice to her was that her daughter was simply exploring the fun of being a dog and nothing more. By the mother overreacting to this behavior, she was giving it instant value and motivating the child to do it all the more for fun. I suggested that she remain calm and dispel her fears that her daughter would be barking at 18. I encouraged her to have some fun with this and bark back. If she was trying to gain cooperation from her daughter, to simply say "mommy can't understand you" and just walk away. I later learned that when mom started ignoring the barking, the little girl turned into a cat. Within a week, the girl had tried out an entire menagerie of animals, but eventually began speaking normally when mom did not respond.

Bill Corbett is the author of the book "Love, Limits, & Lessons," and the executive director of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. You can visit his Web site www.CooperativeKids.com for more information and parenting advice.