

Bad Language



Marcia E. Brubeck, JD,
MSW, LCSW
674 Prospect Avenue
Hartford, CT 06105

860-231-1997
MarciaBrubeck.com

In many families, bad language is a thorny issue. I don't mean profanity from the kids, which, like much other bad behavior, is in my opinion a problem to be addressed in the context of the parent-child relationship. By "bad language" I mean the words grownups often use when they talk about children. If you want your parenting skills to be top drawer, you need to steer clear of some well-known and offensive phrases. Let's consider a few of them.

Negative Attention-Seeking Behavior

In all fairness, I must say that I've heard this phrase more often from mental health professionals and schoolteachers (or staff) than from parents. In most cases, the child is acting out in order to get attention, and the adults are saying that the best way to handle the situation is not to give it to him (or her).

Well, poppycock! If the child needs attention, as children often do, this need will not disappear if we fail to follow through. If we provide attention during neutral moments, and if we abundantly reward positive, constructive actions, the negative stuff should cease--and if it doesn't, we can supply extra incentives to eliminate it. Unfortunately, in the press of daily life, we often fail to catch children doing something right. The child eventually learns that we are more likely to notice misdeeds. We can cure the negative behavior, but the answer is not to withhold attention. We adults need to mend our ways in this regard.

Manipulation

Parents, teachers, and other professionals often complain that a child is manipulative. They ordinarily mean that the child will suit the behavioral means to the desired end.

A smart, pretty thirteen-year-old of my acquaintance follows her mother's directives to the letter, with a brilliant smile, until the parent comes across with the new cell phone. Thereafter the teen leaves her room a mess and deposits dirty

dishes and glasses all over the house. Is this manipulation? It sure is! But I regard it as not only normal but also healthy, a survival skill we all need to practice and one we call, in other contexts, "making lemonade out of lemons." You'd employ all your wiles to persuade the used car salesman to replace those worn tires and brake pads at no extra cost, right? And you would also try to put the best possible face on the blunder you had to explain to your boss at work, wouldn't you? Try seeing your child's behavior in the same light. If we keep our senses of humor, we can rejoice at our children's intelligence and ingenuity. Then all that remains is for us to redirect their skills in ways that benefit us as well as them.

Age Appropriate

Complaints that a child's behavior is not age appropriate usually surface when the child is displaying in public strong emotions that make nearby grownups uncomfortable. But "age appropriate," like the word "normal," is best reserved for statistics such as children's height and weight. In the realm of social and emotional development, it is a figment of our collective imagination and is capable of wreaking considerable psychic damage.

If a child's behavior seems puzzling, we might start by asking ourselves what purpose it serves. A girl who bursts into tears at the slightest disappointment may be demanding perfection from herself. An eight-year-old boy who won't let his mother leave at the start of the school day may fear that she will abandon him as his father did. An eleven-year-old who sucks his thumb may worry about growing up.

When we insist upon "normal" or "age appropriate," we disparage our children. Ideally, we ask our children how they are feeling and, if they are in distress, what might make them feel better. In so doing we help children tune in to and manage their emotions--something we must all be able to do. Every time we tell children what they do not "need" to feel, we invite them to mistrust their feelings and discount their knowledge of themselves. We want them to know and accept themselves, not to believe something is wrong because someone else finds them wanting by comparison with some external standard.

People are not all the same. Everyone learns, matures, and responds to the environment differently and at a different rate of speed. This is good news, not bad. How dull and drab life would be if we were all the same! Or as I tell the children who come to see me, many types of work need doing in the world, and if people were all identical, some important jobs would not get done.

Thank goodness for the scientist who is passionate about honey bees, the photographer who endlessly tests films for permanence and fidelity, the bookkeeper engrossed in making the numbers add up, and the chef who invents

different flavors of salt. Their work would not suit everyone, but we can all enjoy its fruits. Diversity is always to be welcomed and celebrated, even—or especially!—when it forces us to reconsider our perceptions of others and the world.

Copyright © 2007 by Marcia E. Brubeck, 674 Prospect Avenue, Hartford, CT 06105. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission.