



**THINGS
WE
SHOULD
NEVER
SAY TO
KIDS**

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Ten Things We Should Never Say to Kids is temporarily offered free by the author under a [Creative Commons](#) License. Share it as widely as you wish but don't alter, charge or take credit for it. comments to: j.hancock.web@mac.com or thetinycompanycalledme.com.

Thing One

“Do You Have Your Jacket-Homework-Gym-Bag-Back-Pack-Ticket-Keys?”

I’m not kidding when I say your children will despise you if you don’t stop treating them like babies. They’ve probably already warned you.

“Do you have your jacket-homework-gym-bag-back-pack-ticket-keys?” is one of the cruelest things one human being can say to another. Yet it is the parting shot delivered by millions of parents as their children walk out the door each morning. Just when things were going so well... You couldn’t let well enough alone could you; you hadda go for the cheap shot.

“Bye, Mom!”

“Bye, honey -- do you have your jacket-homework-gym-bag-back-pack-ticket-keys?”

You hate to see that kind of thing happen in a nice family. Cryin’ shame.

The kid feels like crying because he thinks his mother is an insufferable nag—just the

effect Mom was going for.

And Mom feels like crying because her boy lacks a certain, shall we say, *initiative*, that makes her wonder how he'll ever, in a million years, make anything of himself when he can't take responsibility for something as simple as getting out the door dressed and ready for the day.

I have good news and bad news. The bad news is, if that kid doesn't know how to identify and collect what he needs for the day, it's because his parents taught him, diligently and day-by-day, that they are in charge of such things. They taught him that needs assessment is beyond him and better left to experts (like them, for instance). They taught him and he learned, OK?

That's the bad news. The good news...is... Actually, there is no good news. Not yet.

Why this compulsion in otherwise sane adults to hijack kids' opportunity to learn what we all know they *have* to learn if they're not going to be eaten by wolves the minute they leave the asylum? I get it but I don't get it.

**Some day
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ask.**

Heck, maybe you're one of those parents (it happens). If so, this is fair warning. Some day you won't be there to ask your son if he has his jacket-homework-gym-bag-back-pack-ticket-keys. You'll have the flu or you'll take a trip or go out to breakfast or something—and only the fact that you live in South Florida, where temperatures are moderate and citrus trees abundant, will prevent him from freezing before he starves.

If you're lucky, he'll get some pants on before he heads off to school where he will make you look so bad, you'll put your home on the market and move to a neighborhood where no one knows your name.

“Why are you wearing two different shoes?” his teacher will ask.

“Uh...because I have two different feet?” he'll say, silently confident he's right about this.

“No,” the teacher will say, “Why do you have on a black shoe and a brown shoe?”

The boy's eyes will narrow, as his nutrient-starved brain weighs the options. *If I look down, he thinks, everyone will laugh because she made me look...*

And, because he will have no recollection of putting on shoes at all, and since it certainly isn't the sort of operation for which a person would cross the bedroom to turn on a

light, your bright young man will be, quite simply, in the dark about the color—if any—of his shoes. He will grin stupidly, nodding his uncombed head in a way that says *I'm nobody's fool*, but actually, at that moment, means *I'm anybody's fool*; and he will shuffle back to his desk, dying-but-not-daring to look at his feet.

Things will progress from bad to worse as the day unfolds. At 11:30 he will complain within earshot of school administrators that he's' hungry because he didn't get any breakfast and you sent neither lunch nor money, and he's not sure what's up with that and could he please just have a bite of that sandwich because he's so hungry he's gonna start taking food off people's trays; so hungry he can't concentrate; so hungry he thinks he might pass out.

I won't trouble you with the details of what will transpire 5th period when the teacher calls for his homework. Suffice it say he will mumble something that sounds as if he's saying *you*, of all people, forgot to do his homework. Matters will grow more complicated from there.

Suffice it say he will mumble something that sounds as if he's saying you, of all people, forgot to do his homework.

Later, when you address his failure while he watches you fold and put away his laundry, he will give you a slack-jawed stare that will make you wonder if a jury of your peers wouldn't applaud if you just dropped him right then, right there.

Here's the thing: Your son didn't learn to forget his homework and lunch, and very nearly his shirt, out on the playground. He learned it from you. You taught him to believe you are in charge of the details of his life. Protest your innocence if you wish but nobody's listening. The facts speak for themselves and CSI [insert-your-town-here] will prove the case beyond a shadow a doubt.

It probably started as an act of kindness (as so many unfortunate things do). It was, most

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likely, a series of good deeds, meant to make life easier for your son. But somewhere along the line you crossed the line, didn't you? One day, what had been a gesture of love became a matter of expedience. You were running late, perhaps. Or your nerves were jangly from double shots of caffeine just a little too close together. And there was the boy, fumbling with

some very simple task—the kind of thing even a child should be able to do, only he wasn't getting it done any time this side of Christmas—so you stepped in. You said, perhaps even sweetly (though perhaps not): “Here, Bosco, let me do that.” And you did; you did it quickly and efficiently and that was all she wrote. Deal done; case closed.

Except that—and how could you have known at that point (so I'm not blaming, I'm just saying)—that it was not really and truly all she wrote because pretty soon you faced a similar situation and, *well who wouldn't?* you remembered how much easier it was for you to just do it and be done with it.

You know the rest. We all do.

How long ago was that? Can you even recall the sequence of events by which your son became functionally helpless? Probably not. You may not have been much more than a child yourself. Actually, this may turn out to be *your* mother's fault. I mean, she couldn't warn you about this? What else, Ma! What else don't I know?

So here we are: A kid who can't dress himself, and you stuck with responsibilities you never signed up for but somebody has to do...

STOP RIGHT THERE.

Do you see what just happened? Somebody has to take care of his business and, since it's apparently not going to be him, it's clearly gonna be...who? You?

Are you planning to go with him to college? Or the Marines? Because I'm not sure they allow that. Or are you hoping his college roommate will finish the job? Or his future spouse, bless her heart. Because if you don't plan to pass these little problems along like the federal deficit, it's time to stop the madness and I'm not kidding.

You can do it.

If he's younger than five and you're not blank-stare-crazy, it should be fairly easy.

If he's in grade school, it'll be a little harder but you'll be glad to put it behind you.

If he's in middle school or high school, count on a struggle—it is, after all, habitual by this point.

If he's still hanging around after high school or, heaven forbid, he's moved back home after a failed attempt at whatever he swore he would do or die trying (just you wait and see!)

... Help yourself to a lemon square and another cup of coffee cuz it's gonna be a long night. But that's OK; joy comes in the morning.

Don't get me wrong. I don't think a random family of monkeys would do a better job of raising your child than you are already doing. I do, however, think monkeys show aptitude when it comes to learning by example. Lacking both vocabulary and apparent motivation, rather than instruct young monkeys to refrain from flinging dung in front of the grandparents, adult monkeys focus on modeling life skills like grubbing for termites with a stick and grooming one's neighbor. Valuable stuff in the treetops. Assuming our children are raised more at ground level, I wonder what life skills they might come to appreciate should they survive to voting age.

Here's a partial list of life skills every entry-level adult needs:

- Timeliness
- Decision-Making
- Responsibility
- Cleanliness (this is an obvious choice as it is next to godliness)

- Godliness
- Negotiation
- Listening
- Empathy
- Basic Logic + Discernment
- Basic Navigation
- Basic Nutrition + Food Preparation
- Basic Household Skills (cleaning, laundry)
- Basic Phone Skills
- Basic Computer Skills
- Basic Physical Fitness + Health Care
- Elementary Personal Finance
- Practical Language Skills
- Emotional Vocabulary
- add your own selections, employing additional sheets as necessary
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Any reasonably intelligent person can learn these skills by the age of 18 and they're abilities anyone would be proud to possess as he enters what adults so glibly call The Real World.....(You know kids hate that, right?)

Of course it's more urgent than that. A kid *needs* these skills to function as an adult and he's not gonna learn them from a book. Okay, some of them are the subjects of great fairy tales and Bible stories, so let's not count that out. But there comes a time when a boy needs to know that empathy is not just the childish lesson of The Golden Rule (Do to others as you would have them do to you; yeh, yeh, ho hum) but the real deal at every level of human relationship. Because sooner or later some cynic will present your son with the conundrum that The Golden Rule is just kid stuff and THE REAL GOLDEN RULE is: "Whoever has the gold, rules." And you, my friend, are uniquely positioned to help him learn empathy so thoroughly and heartily that he won't be long fooled by any fool who tries to pull the old switcheroo.

RIGHT HERE is one of the many places you are better prepared to parent your child than some nice troop of monkeys waiting to adopt him should you opt out. You and the monkeys can both model behavior (and, believe me, the kid is learning a LOT from what you model) but *you* can also engage him in meaningful dialogue of a sort the monkeys can only dream of. You can exchange thoughts and express your emotions in words so much more precisely than waving a branch in the air. You can ask questions and listen to his jumbled answers and keep asking more questions until he gets better at expressing himself and you both come to understand what the other is thinking and feeling and trying to say.

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I feel quite confident it's the reflection and gift of a kind and generous Creator (if it turns out I'm wrong about that, we can have a good laugh together as we disappear into the nothingness I've spent no time whatsoever dreading because I never really believed it—silly me...).

So, where were we? Valuable Life Skills. Right. And how exactly does one (meaning you)

help another (meaning your child) learn Valuable Life Skills?

It begins, in my humble opinion, with learning to ask the right sort of questions in the right

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way. “Do you have your jacket-homework-gym-bag-back-pack-ticket-keys?” is, indeed, in the form of a question, but is it the right sort of question to help a boy learn the Valuable Life Skill of not freezing to death—or whatever? Come with me now to a household not far from my own...

Interior. Morning. Kitchen.

An eleven year old boy runs a piece of bread around the rim of a jelly jar and chews thoughtfully, having decided toast is too much trouble. From another room we hear an adult voice.

Adult: Are you wearing your jacket?

There is silence in the kitchen. The adult speaks louder.

Adult: Are you WEARING your JACKET!

The boy speaks, his mouth full of bread.

Boy: *Snot Cold!*

Adult: *What? I said, are you wearing your jacket?*

Silence in the kitchen. After a moment the adult hollers.

Adult: *ANSWER ME!*

The boy glances up at the clock. Indeed, he is not cold at this moment. He is tired of being yelled at from another room. In an instant the boy decides he will placate the one in the other room but, for reasons he hardly understands, he will not satisfy her. His voice rises with the patronizing tone he will use again fifty years in the future when explaining to his mother why she must eat her strained vegetables.

With that, the boy dips his finger in the jelly, rubs it on another piece of bread which he folds neatly in half, walks past his jacket and out the door into the cold, clear day of his youth. (*Me, Raising Adults, A Humane Guide for Parenting in the New World*, 2007, p. 62)¹

¹ I'm sorry to be so tacky as to quote myself. I do so largely because I am nearly the only author who will allow a hack like me to quote him. You'll find *Raising Adults* at thetinycompanycalledme.com

Do you see what happened there? The wrong question—or the right question asked the wrong way—turns *A Mother's Love* (note possible cable movie title) into a contest of wills between an accomplished adult and a fast-learning 11 year-old.

The 11 year-old, depending on temperament, birth-order and myriad other intangibles, may be—like the legendary sled dog on the arctic ice pack—just angry and stubborn enough to face into the storm until he freezes to death (Note to self: Visit with therapist about this fixation on death by freezing. Or, perhaps, put on a sweater).

Boy: Mom, it's too hot to wear my jacket in here—don't worry about it.

More likely, he will find some way to make it look like your fault at the end of the day. You must not allow this to happen—the freezing to death or the blame shifting. You must seize the moment to take control of the situation. And therein lies the problem. Seizing the moment is a matter of timing, and who among us believes she has enough time as it is? Of *course* you've yelled instructions from another room, your hair tangled hopelessly in the collar of a turtleneck—who hasn't?

It's just that, by the time a child—any child—attains the upper reaches of grade school, she knows what's up. She can see you're spread thin and, guilty pleasure, kind of enjoys watching you try to keep it all together. This is not because she hates you. Far from it. It's because she's settled into the game adults and kids play with each other. It's a game built on mutual disrespect. It is, essentially, an adult game insofar as children learn it from parents and teachers; coaches, employers, retail clerks and law enforcement officers. It runs a vicious circle, this disrespect, returning at regular intervals to every player in the game.

If your child seems disrespectful (it's probably safe to say *when* she seems disrespectful) understand that she learned it the hard way, from the words and deeds of the peers and adults in her world. It's a shock hearing ugly words spewing from the mouth you once fed at your breast, and seeing such awful looks from eyes that once gazed back at you with unlimited trust. Bigger still is the shock of seeing grimaces and hearing words of disrespect you know she lifted verbatim from you.

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It was never supposed to be this way. Anyone can see that.

If you're going to break through this, it will be, at least in part, because you think far enough ahead to help your child think ahead. You can't just tell him. If that worked, everyone would do it. And you can't keep doing it for him unless you want him to dog you without mercy into old age. The only known solution is to get his attention and ask him intelligent, respectful questions until he learns to ask those questions for himself. At which point you'll be out of a job. But you'll have made a friend. And isn't that what you were hoping for all along—that you and your child would grow up to be good friends for the rest of your life?

All right, enough with the mushy stuff. Here's how you can learn to ask the right questions (and ask them the right way).

Let's take that definition a step farther: A good question is one that can only be answered by the person you're asking.

That's curious. What does that mean? A good question is one that can only be answered by the person you're asking because pretty much anything else is a *test*. Or a *trap*—though, of

course I mean that in the nicest possible way because really, who doesn't like to be trapped?

"Where are my keys?" is not a good question since the answer, spoken or not, is "Am I your keys' keeper?"

Definition: A good question is one to which you don't have the answer. Highlight this. You'll need it later.

"Have you seen my keys?" is, likewise, nearly useless. The answer is: "Of course, I've seen your keys many times. As a matter of fact, I was with you when you changed the lock after you lost your keys that other time. Which keys are we talking about by the way?" No one looking for keys has time for this.

"Will you please help me look for my front door keys?" is excellent! It can be answered specifically and directly. Ask your daughter that, and you've asked her to: A) recall your front door keys and, B) consider the importance of her current activity compared with the relative urgency of helping you out of a bind.

When your child answers that excellent question, you'll learn something about her

priorities. If you say, “Will you please help me look for my front door keys?” and she replies, “I have to keep pressure on Dad’s chest wound,” well you may be disappointed but you’ll have gained some perspective won’t you.

More examples: “Do you have everything on the list I’ve been forced to prepare for you because you’re so lame-brained?” may come across as the tiniest bit unfriendly. Avoid it.

“Do you have what you need for the day?” is pretty good.

“Do you have everything you think you’ll need today?” is even better.

Asking the question this way suggests that you’re interested in your child and her day, without implying that you’re taking responsibility for her success or failure. The question invites her to consider the variety of activities she’s likely to undertake (classes, sports, work, transportation), the conditions she’s likely to encounter (temperature, precipitation), and prepare for those activities under those conditions.

“What did you do with my keys?” sounds desperate and hostile.

Assuming you're not in a shooting war with each other, when you put it that way she's likely to guess that you'd be willing to help if needed. And best of all, for the health of your relationship, you've asked a question she can answer without feeling like she's been set up.

Instead of complaining about how you always treat her like a baby, she'll take a moment to reflect, ask if you'll buy her a car and, when you remind her she's ten years old and parking would be a problem for her at school, she'll get on with her day and you can get on with yours.

There are three known catches and here they are:

1. "Do you have what you think you need for the day?" has a freshness date stamped on the bottom.

Use it for a while with the understanding that it will eventually expire and your kid will give you a look that says, "You're doing it again." At which point you'll be ready with another question so good it may well last the rest of your life. That's a pretty good promise, isn't it? Ready? Here it is:

"Can you think of anything you need from me today?"

I love that. Simple, direct, reflective, inviting. Variations on the theme include, “Is there anything you’d like me to do for you today?” and, “Can I help you with anything today?” You get the idea, right? Once your daughter consistently takes responsibility for her own business, you can still let her know you’re engaged without seeming to hover.

So that’s the first catch. Followed inevitably by the second...

2. You have to accept her thoughtful answer. Which is reason

enough to start with low-impact activities and days so that if she guesses wrong, it’s not a big deal.

That means scaling. If your daughter is three years old and you ask if she has everything she needs for the day, she has no idea what you’re asking. So scale it down to something like, “Do you have what you think you’ll need while you’re playing at Dory’s house?” or “What do you think you might need for our walk around the block?” Help her explore some reasonable possibilities by asking questions. Take her to look out the window to see if she thinks she may

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need a sweater—that kind of thing. Train her to think by asking questions about the world. That’s pretty much how we all learn.

Later, whether you started at age three or age 13, the only way to make this work is to take her word for it when she says, “Yes, thanks, I have everything I need for the day, now get off my back.” Unless guessing wrong is life-threatening, even if you believe she’s wrong in her assessment, please, please, please let her find out for herself and learn to correct her own mistake instead of telling her, which only ensures she’ll feel foolish and *less than* you because you picked holes in her plan before she had a chance to play it out.

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Finally, catch number three...

3. Occasionally, she’ll guess wrong.

Who doesn’t? It’s a complicated world; she’s a complicated person. She may even guess wrong several times in quick succession—like when I locked my keys in the van four times in ten days. It was a learning experience. After the fourth time, I hid a wire shirt-hanger on the

exterior spare-tire rack so I wouldn't have to borrow one to break myself in. That, of course, was enough to remind me to use my key instead of just pushing down the whatchamacallit to lock the door—which was a good thing because it wasn't long before I

owned a car with a flat whatchamacallit that was unmoved by shirt-hangers. In any event it was years until I locked myself out the next time (and missed a flight from Dulles to Denver... But that's another story. THIS story is, no one died and I learned the hard way what no one could teach me by force of organizational logic). Since nobody's perfect, see what you can do to ensure that your daughter's lessons-learned-the-hard-way are no big deal—which means letting her suffer small failures now to avoid big ones later.

At the end of the day, this is the point:

Your children can and should and must learn to take responsibility for their own business. And the only sure way for them to learn that is practice, practice, practice. Effective parents,

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teachers, coaches, employers, mentors, aunts, uncles and adult friends help kids learn while the stakes are relatively small. Good questions asked well are the medium of instruction because responsibility can't be taught, it can only be learned.