



**THINGS
WE
SHOULD
NEVER
SAY TO
KIDS**

JIM HANCOCK

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 Two

“What Were You Thinking!”

I’ve looked into this pretty carefully and it turns out that a lot parenting is thinly veiled hazing.

You know: *hazing*—where the strong (or privileged) humiliate the weak (or recently arrived) as part of initiating them into a desirable society. And don’t you find it interesting that one of the privileges of membership is permission to inflict the same kind of humiliation on the next group? So you can see it’s not a total loss.

Hazing is a form of cultural craziness in which dehumanizing behavior is thought to make better people of us.

It’s a time-honored ritual among athletes, soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, coast guards, lawyers, doctors, gang bangers, fraternity brothers, sorority sisters, prison inmates and guards, boys, girls, siblings and—it can now be reported—parents and children. Hazing, of course, is

not without a point. In a strange, strange twist, hazing seems to promote loyalty and buy-in to whatever else may happen. *I survived the hazing; I guess I can make it through a Congressional inquiry* (or a prison term or whatever it is that threatens the “team”). Parental hazing serves much the same function: Kids who get the short end of that stick from their parents tend to be very loyal for a very long time (but it’s only fair to note that things get very dramatic when they finally break ranks).

At it’s worst, hazing is brutally degrading, sexualized violence.

Consider, for instance, the molestation and rape of Air Force Academy cadets. Seven women, cadets and former cadets talked with ABC Television’s *20/20* (March 28, 2003). They described a culture in which upperclassmen exercise a virtual tyranny over freshmen, correspondent Lynn Sherr reported:

They said they feared that their careers would be ruined if they reported the sexual assaults. They were taught early in basic training: protect your fellow cadets at all costs — even if it means you get hurt.

Yikes. If it can happen at a U.S. Military Academy, can you imagine anyplace it couldn't happen?

Ruth, who asked us not to give her full name, said she was astonished when, right after basic training, a senior female cadet pulled her and several of her classmates aside and told them that sexual assaults were commonplace at the academy. She kind of sat us down and

said, “You know, I was raped twice as an underclassman. It will happen to you most likely, and you just have to accept it,” Ruth said.

In the mid-range, hazing is merely brutal—the sort of behavior identified as criminal assault if it occurs between strangers. The video image of a drunken powder puff football player pounding her teammate—her teammate!—with rib-cracking force in an affluent Chicago suburb comes to mind. It was probably just the alcohol (and if you believe that, I’ve got a couple more for you).

Parental hazing is generally more about emotional assault than physical or sexual

violence—though God knows those things happen too. An astonishing number of parents who would never hit a child in anger (certainly not a child "too old to be spanked") don't think twice about emotional manhandling. The adult who excuses his behavior with the words "I never laid a hand on him" is just flat missing the point. You know the old saying:

**Sticks & Stones
may
Break my
Bones
but
Words
can
Break my
Heart**

Actually, that's not the old saying because it's truer by far than the playground version.

saying at all; but it should be

Most adults—parents, teachers, coaches, employers, pastors, the whole lot—avoid using

force with children. Instead, they employ—all right, as long as we’re being honest, we—employ harsh words, sarcastic words, dismissive, belittling words. The more verbally skilled among us do it without profanity. Vulgar language is a piece of cake compared with the subtle art of ripping a kid to shreds with Sunday School words.

Adults tease, taunt, and resort to name-calling, ridicule, and disgusted looks to intimidate kids and keep them in line.

Stop me if you already heard this one:

It’s a November night, not that cold yet, but dark before six o’clock and threatening rain. The huge chair dwarfs Erik, having been summoned to his father’s home office, where he waits while his dad shuffles papers. He is 13 and his slender hands press against the arms of the chair, pushing his back to the rear of the seat. When Martin finally looks up from his desk, Erik looks away.

“Erik,” Martin says quietly, “this has got to stop.”

“What!” Erik objects, not sure what ground he’s defending.

Martin cuts in, a hint of threat in his tone, “Don't! Don't you do this. Don't you take this attitude with me. You will listen respectfully and speak respectfully. Is that understood?”

“Yes,” Erik says. “I understand. Can we just get on with it?”

Erik mutters something unintelligible and looks away again.

Martin presses. “Erik: Is that understood?”

Ignoring the bait, Martin begins quietly, leaving plenty of room to build. “I want you to tell me what's going on,” he says. “Why are you so moody; why are you making your family pay for your unhappiness; what, exactly, is your problem?”

Erik opens his mouth to reply, then pulls into himself on the big chair, groaning. “I really don't want to start this. It's not going to do any good. It never does.”

“How can you say that?” Martin responds. “I'm here; we're talking. This is your chance, Buster. You tell me what's going on and let's see what we can do about it. Otherwise straighten up and fly right. You're not a baby any more, Erik.”

Erik swings his feet to the floor, leaning forward. “Then why do you keep treating me

like one?"

Martin meets his gaze. "Meaning...specifically?"

"Meaning I still don't understand why I don't get to go to the dance Friday. I think that stinks!

Martin rocks back in his own chair, looking weary. "Okay. Now it's getting clear. Just how many times are we going to go over this? Did I stutter? Was I talking too fast? You're not going to the dance! You are not emotionally—I mean good Lord, son! Look at you now! If you can't handle a little disappointment with the people who love you, just where do you expect to find the resources to handle—I don't know—peer pressure?"

Erik is curled up again in the chair. Martin continues, "Are you reading me, Son?"

Erik looks sidelong at his father, biting his lip. He nods faintly. "Is that a yes?" Martin demands. Erik nods again, without making eye contact.

"Good," Martin says. "Then we can continue. Because I want to know what else is going on in there. I know it's got to be more than that stupid dance. What is it really, son? What's

got you moping around here like a weepy little girl?"

Erik is sideways in the chair, his neck is arched back, his head pressed against the chair back.

"Go on, son. We've got a rapport here. What is it?"

Erik takes the chance, but hesitantly: "Dad, I just feel yelled at all the time." The boy steals a glance at his father, who settles back in his seat, his mouth closed but working as if tasting the words.

Erik's mother speaks softly from the doorway behind him. "How's it coming you two? Dinner's just about ready..."

Erik flinches as Ruth strokes his hair. "Oh, honey, nobody's yelling at you. We love you. You know that."

"Well, Ruth, I don't know," Martin says. "Erik here feels yelled at. I'm thinking here and I just don't know, I haven't heard any yelling, have you?"

Martin closes the deal. "Son, I think that if I were yelling, you'd know it. Now if you want yelling I can give it to you and I'll tell you something, Mister, if you don't get hold of

yourself you're going to hear some yelling and a whole lot more!"

Martin stands behind his desk. "I think we're ready, Ruth. Come wash up, son. Dinner's ready."

Martin crosses to the door, past Erik who is dwarfed by the big chair.

+ + + + +

Here's the thing. Overpowering a child because I can out-think him isn't the same as pinning him to the wall, but it's still wrong. Of *course* I can out-think him. I'm old! Age and experience, mixed with liberal amounts of guile, make me a formidable opponent to just

Let me be as clear about this as I can: Adults do this kind of thing because it works—it works every day until it stops working; until we see and hear contempt coming back at us.

about anyone between the ages of two and ten. Heaven help the first-grader who takes me on in a battle of wits! I'll give her a tongue-lashing she won't soon forget.

Or not.

If your near term objective is to enforce noise control (where *noise* is defined as any behavior

that interrupts the free exercise of your will), it's easy and effective to silence a child with harsh language. If your goal is to reinforce your alpha adult superiority, go ahead and growl.

But take my word for it: Do that and one way or another you'll pay. Backtalk? Certainly. Sneakiness? Most likely. Or passive-aggression. Or silence.

"What were you thinking!" you'll demand in what appears at first to be an emphatic question (what with the question mark and all). Your girl, the apple of your eye, will take a stab at answering and you'll roll your eyes as if you felt faint, or clutch your head as if your eardrums were bursting. Her voice will trail off, uncertainly...

"I'm waiting," you'll say (or words to that effect) but now it will be clear to her that sometimes a question isn't really a question.

"Well?" you'll say...

She will speak softly... "I don't know."

Use words against your bright, sensitive girl and she may just stop trying to communicate. She may simply shut you out.

“Excuse me?”

Silence.

“I asked you a question; I expect an answer young lady,” you’ll say, sounding remarkably like a person you swore you would never ever become. “What exactly did you think was going to happen?”

One way or another... Some push back, some push off, but one way or another there’s a price to be paid for using words against a child.

“...I said I don’t know,” she’ll mumble. So you’ll send her to her room to think about it, which is where she’ll spend the remaining years of girlhood, until the day she emerges with a suitcase packed for her trip to Anywhere-but-Here.

I know this because I’m a word guy and this is not theoretical for me. For more than a decade I used words against my daughter and I knew, more or less, what I was doing. I say *more or less* because I didn’t understand the extent of the damage; couldn’t see the wall going up until it was too late to do much about it. And, by then, what would I have done anyway? *Talk* her out of it?

Other than one regrettable occasion, I don't remember using profanity against her. I was, after all, a Christian youth worker.

My daughter, quite sanely I think, shut me out. She wasn't rude about it. She wasn't even

unpleasant. I think she just got very careful about the

kinds of things she was willing to talk about with me. Because, why in the world would she put herself in a position to take abuse from me? So, though we remained close in many ways, we didn't go as deep as we might have if I'd been a nicer man.

In two decades of working with adolescents every day, I did that kind of thing over and over. Less, I think, in the last half than the first, but I don't think I'm completely in the clear a full decade after I gave up my official youth worker business card. In fact, I'd be less than

The walls children erect are, of course, meant to protect them by keeping us out when we go nuts on them.

candid if I didn't admit I'm still tempted to deploy hard words to protect what I think of as my

The tools of my torture were sarcasm, mockery, scorn, contempt...

turf. On my good days it's just a temptation. On my bad days it's a sin. Still crazy after all these years...

And just how insane is it that a child should feel the need to take refuge from the folks who brought him into the world? The obvious answer: It's totally, utterly, completely mad. And, like some other forms of madness, it appears to be hereditary. Which is to say, if we see it in one generation, there's a pretty good chance it will show up in the next as well.

Which leads us back to *hazing* and this bizarre, Bill-Murray-Groundhog-Day-Revolving-Door of parental misbehavior. It would be different if we didn't know better; if *we ourselves* hadn't truly hated being treated this way when we were children. Well, we *did* hate it, and we *do* know better, so there you have it.

My parents, God rest them, taught me most of what I know about misbehaving. Actually that's an overstatement. My parents provided a lot of misbehavior upon which I built to my own specifications.

My mother was given to periodic binges of weeping rage that were alarming to behold. That said, I don't know that anyone beyond our family ever beheld them. Outside our home,

we all of us lived the nicest of lives, inasmuch as *niceness* was a core value in our slice of Southern culture.

Inside the house things were different.

Not everyday you understand, just now and again. I believe my mom came by her rage more or less honestly. Her mother, as I recall her, was a sour woman whom I found it best to avoid. This was difficult during the years she and my grandfather lived in our home. Granddaddy and I sought sanctuary outside the house, smoking and roaming the woods—he was a pipe smoker (Prince Albert in the can); I was heavily into dirt clods and mud puddles. I remember a lot of tiptoeing around my grandmother. I recall saying, “Yes ma’am” and “No Ma’am” but I don’t remember ever *calling* her anything. This was in sharp contrast to Granddaddy, who delighted us young boys with ad hoc story times and uninhibited farting—he had to know he was cracking us up but he never let on; not even a hint of a smile.

I’ve heard my grandmother described as *mean* (though I’m hard-pressed to recall which relative said it). I never thought my mother was mean. But—behind closed doors—she could

certainly be shrill. It seemed to me that my father and older sister took quite a few hits. I learned the *duck & cover* technique they taught us at school also had applications in the home. This may be why the term *nuclear family* carries explosive connotations for me.

The *duck & cover* proved useful in times of open conflict, but my father showed me other ways of dealing with conflict.

My father demonstrated the artful disappearance. I learned from watching him that it takes two to have a fight, and if you can't gather a quorum, you can't have the meeting. Not that there weren't some pretty good verbal scraps around the house but, if memory serves me, most of the *really* good ones happened in the family car where nobody could get away. My dad avoided many confrontations simply by leaving home early and staying out late. This tactic, of course, also contributed to the escalation of hostilities once all the players were in the room (or automobile).

One way to describe my father's pattern of life is to say he was a working pastor—a *preacher*, as we called them in those days in that part of the world. He worked as a *preacher*

while, at the same time, chipping away at an advanced degree in—this is rich—*Marriage and Family Counseling*.

Is it just me or is the irony of a Ph.D. candidate in Marriage and Family Counseling who doesn't have what it takes to engage in growing a happy marriage and family a painful cliché?

Once my older sister was gone, I hid out more and more, immersed in sports and friendships and losing myself in science fiction books. Not that it was difficult to hide from my father who was hiding from my mother and, maybe, me.

When he was home my father was a brooding, seething presence. I had no way of guessing what might set him off. Except money, which was a sure bet. When he lit up it was never as noisy as my mom, but his words tore through the house like shrapnel. So, on principle, I bunkered in, avoiding contact when I could and keeping it light when I couldn't. Our patterns turned to habits and, entering adolescence, I was out of the house nearly as much as he was.

And then one day he was really gone.

My dad never quite got there — the Ph.D. or the happy family.

It had been a rocky spring; I knew that without knowing why. In June, half an hour into a road trip from Florida to California, my mother told me he wouldn't be there when we got back. And he wasn't. When we returned, there was evidence he'd been there with his girlfriend while we were gone and that was that; Game Over.

Just how it came to that, and what we all did next, is a story for another time. For now, suffice it to say I was not shocked when my father left (though, of course, people in the church were taken completely by surprise). I was, in fact, relieved...

What an awful thing to say: I was relieved when my father moved out. I felt very guilty about that for a long time.

All this to say my parents loved me. They never laid a hand on me. And they could either of them take me apart without even trying—without, I think, even knowing their words were undoing me. As a consequence, without

My parents were joined by some of my schoolteachers, a few of my coaches, assorted adult relatives and legions of my trash-talking peers. In all this I was a willing learner.

meaning to, they taught me how to turn words against them. With practice I learned to use words against other people too.

Please excuse this biblical reference if you don't swing that way. I just think it hits the nail squarely on the head. "It only takes a spark," James wrote in the Biblical book that bears his name, "to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that." (James 3:1-10, *The Message*). Here it is in context:

Don't be in any rush to become a teacher, my friends. Teaching is highly responsible work. Teachers are held to the strictest standards.

And none of us is perfectly qualified. We get it wrong nearly every time we open our mouths. If you could find someone whose speech was perfectly true, you'd have a perfect person, in perfect control of life.

A bit in the mouth of a horse controls the whole horse. A small rudder on a huge ship in the hands of a skilled captain sets a course in the face of the strongest winds. A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—or destroy it!

It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn

It feels good to administer a good tongue lashing, right up to the moment it feels bad.

harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell.

This is scary: You can tame a tiger, but you can't tame a tongue—it's never been done. The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth!

"With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image." For our purposes, change men and women

to boys and girls, as in: *With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse our children, the very boys and girls he made in his image.* That's what we're talking about here. Finding a way to stop badmouthing our children. Finding ways to bless rather than curse them. I think it begins with looking at our children with compassion. Compassion, you may recall, is a compound word that has to do with entering another person's suffering. This should be easy. We were, after all, in their shoes just about a minute ago. How did we forget so quickly? Or is it that our pain—so much of it inflicted by adults who were supposed to look out for us—is so keen we just don't want to go back there? Have we seen our children hurting and turned our backs because addressing their misery means confronting our own fusty wounds? God help us if we have. God have mercy on us and help us set the world right.