



**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 Three “Because I Said So”

Dinner was over and my friend was recounting a conversation with her grown-up daughter: "Mom," Karen said in her daughter's voice, "My whole life I swore I would never say it, but I said it anyway." She had us right where she wanted us. We waited for the next line, savoring this tale of 20-something comeuppance. She milked it shamelessly, as any of us would. We nodded, grinning; we saw it coming.

"Mom, he just wouldn't shut up. He just kept after me. I was trying to look after the baby and he just kept saying it and saying it."

Yes, we nodded; *Yes, we know how they can be; of course!* It was delicious. If Karen were a smoker this is where she would have taken the deep drag, letting smoke drift lazily from her mouth before shaking her head at the utter predictability of this crazy life.

"Mom," she said, "for two solid minutes he kept saying, 'why, why, why, why?' and I can't believe it but I turned around and gave him a look and, '—we darn near finished the sentence

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for her; all but spoke it aloud, in unison—' I turned around and gave him a look and said, "Because I said so! That's why! Now drop it!"

We could not have been more pleased; could not have been happier to see the young woman—who we love, by the way—brought low by a two-year-old. *Now!* we thought, *Now she understands how we feel! Ha!*

This was not our finest moment.

Why, I wonder, after 14 generations of life together as North Americans, has no one solved this problem? Why would people in their 50's—responsible, hardworking folk—sit around and gloat over our failure to prepare our own offspring for parenting?

Why, for goodness sake, doesn't somebody just say, "I can do better than that: I have an answer that's better than "Because I said so!"

This is not rocket science. We are the reasonably intelligent daughters and sons of reasonably intelligent parents in a line stretching back as far as anyone cares to remember. But we've surrendered ourselves to some...*habits*, let's say, that have us stuck in a revolving door.

I say *stuck*. What I mean is a lot of us go round and round, covering the same ground, wondering why the view is so familiar.

If we've learned anything at all about parenting, it's that we can make children do what we say for quite a while.

I suppose it's worth saying that, if you're going around in circles and you *like* it—if you chose the circle and it's working for you, then you're not really stuck are you? So if that's you, then knock yourself out I guess. I've come to think there's no greater waste of time than trying to convince someone things are not as good as he believes they are. In business it can be done from time to time if there's enough money on the line. But here, where it's just the quality of people's lives at stake, well things are what they are. Give it time; we'll see how it plays out.

But if you're inclined to wish we could get off the carousel of no-progress, I'm inclined to say I believe we can.

One thing we've learned, if we've learned anything at all about parenting, is that we can make children do what we say for quite a while. These are the cute years. Then comes a period when we feel gratitude if our young continue along that path, and confusion,

indignation and remorse if they choose a different way. In either event, we recognize that past a certain point there is no guarantee they will behave as we wish.

What we don't seem to understand is why one child continues to act in ways that more or less please us and another takes off in a decidedly unfavorable direction.

Now I know this may seem like a stretch to you but I think there's at least a dotted line from how parents wield power when children are young, to how those children choose to behave once they have greater distance and more autonomy from their folks.

For the record: Just saying “whatever” is no better than saying “Because I said so.”

The parent who is overly permissive is likely to find that his adolescent child experiences emotional and social vertigo—a sense of spinning out of control because he doesn't know where the boundaries are. He feels exposed, maybe even abandoned when, every so often, he gets hammered for crossing what was to him a quite invisible line.

The children of permissive parents tend to be manipulative, disrespectful, excessive, and unable to draw appropriate boundaries with others. The drug of choice is most likely marijuana. If they think their parents are not just permissive but also hostile they may gravitate

to hallucinogens and inhalants (H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelson, *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*, Prima Publishing/St. Martins Press, 1989, page 208-216).

The overly strict parent might learn —were he to ask—that his child feels hemmed in. Children who perceive their parents are too controlling gravitate toward alcohol, cocaine, and sedatives. And, if they think the control is hostile, they respond with resistance, aggressiveness, vandalism, acting out sexually, and their own brand of hostility (ditto).

Overly permissive or overly strict: pick one you like as long you're prepared to endure domestic hell before seeing your kid out the door for good.

Better yet, don't be overly anything.

Treat your child with something like *compassionate engagement*, by which I mean a relationship marked by empathetic borders. The compassionate parent never forgets what it's like to be young (and if for some reason he surrendered that sensibility, he endeavors to reclaim it for his child's sake). At the same time, he engages each child in ways that establish clear, fair limits on behavior. If you think about it I think you'll agree this is respectful

behavior. If you look in the eyes of a child and see a human being with the same hope and longing and potential you have, you know shabby treatment won't do.

When a child asks the dreaded "Why?" question, "Because I said so," falls short of both compassion and engagement. And so does, "Do whatever you want—you will anyway." Overly strict/overly permissive—the balance we seek is not overly anything.

Here's the better answer. You probably won't be surprised to see it's not a statement but a question:

Q: Mommy! *Why?*

A: That's a good question. Why do you want to know?

Now, at the very least, your kid has to make the choice to tell you what he's thinking or risk falling in the trap you just avoided. He can't really say, "Because I said so." He knows that won't fly. And he'll quickly see the shorter, less authoritative, "Because!" is no good, if only on account of your quick comeback: "But *Why?*"

Still, this is not a trick. Unless the lad has fallen into a bad habit of questioning without

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thinking, when he asks why you gave this or that directive he probably has a reason. Does he not trust you? Have you been unclear? Or contradictory? Do your directions appear fickle? I imagine you would like to understand his reason for questioning you. Well, if anybody knows, it's him. So why not ask?

I mean you do want to know, right? Even if what you find out blows your cover because you both realize you're the one who modeled the bad habit of answering without thinking. Sometimes the truth can be truly annoying.

This is important to me because, honestly, I started out wanting my child to be both strong-minded (in dealing with strangers and people who don't meet my standards) and compliant (by obeying my every whim). Trouble is, I figured out, it's tough to have it both ways.

The conclusion I reached once I took time to think about it was that what I really wanted was for my daughter to be reasonable, no matter who she was dealing with.

Fine. So what's reasonable?

Perhaps you followed the gut-wrenching story of the mother who innocently told her 13 year-old son to tough it out when he called home several times from summer football camp.² CBS correspondent Peter Van Sant spoke with her later:

...he told us that they were keeping them up. We said, 'Are they hurting you?' He said no," recalls Carol. "I assumed he was homesick, so I said, 'Stick it out. It's a couple of days.' You know, what could be going on? There's coaches. There's supervision, like any other school event.

What was going on was a brutal ordeal—five days when her son was repeatedly sodomized with broomsticks, golf balls, pinecones and toothbrushes while other players watched and laughed. "He was waiting for them [the coaches] to come in and save him, but no one came," Carol's husband, Vinny, lamented.

No one came and no one told. No one. Three days after camp ended Carol's son came to her and said, "I'm bleeding. I need to see a doctor."

That's not reasonable behavior in any way, from any of those boys, including Carol's son.

² (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/12/48hours/main611479.shtml>)

Compliance is very appealing to institutions.

Where in hell did they learn that? There's every season to assume they learned it at home and school and church and on the athletic field—all the places where power and tradition teach us to do as we're told. I don't think parents can rely on institutions to teach their children when to speak up, when to resist, when to stand up and walk out of the room, when to blow the whistle. Institutions are too much invested in channeling behavior to reach a goal. Because we said so, is the institutional line of reasoning, usually softened by some appeal to a shared vision: *You want to be a winner don't you? You want to get a good test score don't you? You want to go to heaven...don't you?* The personal, parental line is something like: *You want Daddy to be proud of you, don't you?* More on that later...

When a child who morning, noon and night is all about learning asks his parent for clarification and none is forthcoming beyond "Because I said so," what other lesson than compliance is he's learning? If children learn early to obey unreasonable directives—if we and their other teachers convince them that, as far as we're concerned, compliance is next to godliness (and we'd pick compliance if they said we had to choose between the two)—they

have been set up for passivity and potentially for abuse.

This is dangerously close to overstatement; I know that.

I know there are times when obedience is necessary for a child's safety. What I don't accept is the no-questions-asked-one-size-fits-all-I'm-the-parent-*that's-why* approach to children whose whole cognitive *job* is learning how to think well and choose well. I think we have to engage children compassionately or concede that they will learn plenty we didn't mean to teach.

A father gives direction to his four year-old. And compassionate engagement rolls out something like this...

Boy: Why?

Dad: That's a good question. Tell me why you want to know.

Or

Boy: Why?

Dad: Because it will help me if you do it this way. Will you please help me?

Or

Boy: Why?

Dad: Because I love you and I want you to be safe.

Or

Boy: Why?

Dad: Do I say 'why?' every time you ask me to do something for you?

Or

Boy: Why?

Dad: Why not?

The short answer, "Because I said so," is meant to end discussion, which, in general, seems to me like a bad idea. I think we should be constantly looking for ways to keep the conversation going. All these answers do that. They all call for a response from the child (except "Because I love you and I want you to be safe," which I think is just nice to hear from time to time).

Let's play it out a little farther. The adult says, "We have to go now."

To which the kid replies, “Why?”

So the adult says, “Why not?”

And the kid responds, “I’m not ready.”

The Enforcer inside the adult recommends saying, “Well I’m ready, so get your rear in gear.” But the Teacher inside tells the Enforcer to hold on a minute and says to the child, “Oh yeah? Well tell me about that, because I want to keep my promise to be on time to meet your dad, which means we have to go now.”

The conversation could go in any direction from here. Maybe the kid looks up from his LeapPad and replies, “Daddy’s never on time to meet us anyway, just let me finish this level.” At which juncture even the Enforcer has to admit the child may have a point.

From there it would be dealer’s choice. I should think the adult response might include an exploration of how the child feels to be kept waiting (don’t

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anticipate too much detail from a small fry but that doesn't mean it's not worth asking), and perhaps the promise to discuss this perceived unfairness with Daddy.

Whether the adult believes it's important to leave right then or grant the kid two minutes to finish the level, seems entirely a matter of context. The Enforcer is apt to be too strict, the Playmate (the one inside who craves the company of your child) is inclined to be too permissive. I say let the Teacher decide. "What is it I want my little person to learn?" she'll ask, and "What's the best way to learn that?"

It may be the best response will be something like, "Sorry, kiddo, it's going to take some time to get where we're going and I think it's important to keep my promises, so we need to leave now. I'll tell you what: I'll talk with your dad about being on time when we come to meet him. And if you'd like, I'll try to give you a little more notice before I say it's time to leave next time—can you help me remember that?" I think that sounds reasonable. I would want my child to be as reasonable in her communication with me (which, by the way, she was and is).

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Teacher decide.**

At the end of the day, it may come down to something as clear and uncluttered as the Golden Rule. There are versions of the Golden Rule from a dozen cultures spanning the globe. My personal favorite comes from Jesus:

“Here is a simple, rule-of-thumb guide for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them. Add up God’s Law and Prophets and this is what you get” (Matthew 7:12, The Message).

Teach your child to value that level of mutual respect and I think it’s hard to go very far wrong.