



**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](mailto:j.hancock.web@mac.com) or [thetinycompanycalledme.com](http://thetinycompanycalledme.com).

## Thing Four

### “You Are Such a Pretty Little Thing”

All things considered, I think one of the worst things you can tell a little girl is how pretty she is.

“Honey, you could stand to lose a few pounds,” is worse. In the current crisis of childhood obesity—nearly one in five American children is dangerously overweight—losing a few pounds is hardly the point.<sup>3</sup> Health is the point. “You could stand to lose a pound or two drives the conversation to its most superficial level. It’s roughly equivalent to saying, “You’re not pretty.” But how many adults are cruel enough to say something that mean? So for the moment let’s stick to prettiness.

**Let’s say for the sake of argument that a child stands before us and the child in question is relatively attractive in whatever subculture she inhabits. So what?**

---

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/overwght99.htm>

Telling her she's pretty is a useful compliment the way Krispy Kreme is a food product. Tasty? Sure, if you think so. Healthy? Nutritious? An important part of a balanced diet? Are you *kidding*? The nutritional value of a donut is roughly equivalent to its signature shape. The only way those puffy, deep fried zeros could be less useful is if the holes were filled in and stuffed with...I don't know...*kreme*?

But gee golly do those bad boys sell. Some people can't get enough of 'em. And, to be fair, anybody looking for quick, legal, bump could hardly get there quicker than a coupla donuts washed down with a 16-ounce cuppa java.<sup>4</sup>

Telling a child she's pretty is just about guaranteed to give her an emotional bump. But so what?

Here's what. *Pretty* puts a girl on emotional welfare. *Pretty* teaches her to trust the eyes of others to determine her self worth—which she may already be inclined to do. Later, if she's internalized the lesson of *pretty* as a measure of her

***Pretty  
puts a girl  
on  
emotional  
welfare.***

---

<sup>4</sup> Actually, at this writing the donut industry is staggering under the weight of scandal. It turns out the active ingredients in donuts—fat and sweeteners—are being held in place by banned substances in the form of flour; a known Class I carbohydrate. This is why I'm investing in the new Little-Tub-O-Lard franchise. We'll be able to drive up to the window and order flavored, sweetened lard in portion-controlled containers like the individual cream cheese servings. Dip in with the little plastic scraper (included) or use your finger! Mmm-Lardy, that's good!

worth, she'll look to strangers for affirmation. And maybe it won't matter whether the person who says she's pretty is trustworthy, loyal, brave and true. Maybe he just has to know the magic words to put her under a spell; to get her to do things she wasn't planning.

### **And maybe that won't end badly.**

The thing is, *Pretty* is so *subjective*. We know beyond a shadow of doubt there is no accounting for taste.

*Pretty* is so *impermanent*. The explosive growth of cosmetic surgery—butt lifts in the U.S., for example, increased 526% from 1992-2003—affirms what we already know in our hearts: gravity gets us all in the end.<sup>5</sup>

But most of all—by which I meant worst of all—the girl has nothing to do with being, or not being, *pretty*. If her hair is the right color and texture to be called pretty where you live, well that's just fortunate, isn't it? If the tone of her skin and her body type are favorably appraised, she may do slightly better in first grade than if she were less attractive. But congratulating a child for being pretty is a meal of empty calories. She had nothing to do with

---

<sup>5</sup> American Society of Plastic Surgeons, [http://www.plasticsurgery.org/public\\_education/2003statistics.cfm](http://www.plasticsurgery.org/public_education/2003statistics.cfm)

those attributes; they are not achievements. She can take no credit for them and no blame when they fade, as they will. And then what?

A child who learns to rely on empty praise lives in a never land of false expectations (I'm pretty, therefore people owe me...what? more praise? adoration? privilege?) Later, regardless of the objective facts (since there are no objective facts when it comes to beauty), when she no longer believes she's pretty she'll be tempted to fake it; she'll be tempted to become a people-pleaser so folks will still like her; she'll be tempted to obsess about something (anything) that deflects attention from her sense of faded beauty; she'll be tempted to show off her body to attract people who will tell her she's pretty (though she'll doubt their sincerity); she'll be tempted to disordered eating patterns and substance abuse; she'll be tempted to act out sexually. I'm not saying she'll fall prey to all these enticements or any of them; only that she'll have been set up to face temptations she might otherwise have avoided.

In a related story, 70% of teenage pregnancies are fathered by individuals over the age of

20.<sup>6</sup> I call them *individuals* because it's difficult to call them men. I think of them as over-aged boys at best, unable to keep pace with women their own age. At worst they are predators victimizing girls along the fast track to the whole sadder but wiser thing. If you think there's no relationship I beg you to think again. The chief basis for such encounters (they sometimes reach the level of relationship) is flattery, which you may recall, is "complimenting somebody, often excessively or insincerely, especially in order to get something."<sup>7</sup> As a rule of thumb the appeal to flattery is not very persuasive to a person with a strong inner compass. People—in this case girls—whose sense of direction relies too heavily on the assessments of others (even if the others are parents who love them dearly) may be lured off course by the sort of flattery that sounds for all the world like an expression of genuine regard and affection.

**In a related story, 70% of teenage pregnancies are fathered by individuals over the age of 20.**

---

<sup>6</sup> Just Thought You Oughta Know, The Medical Institute for Sexual Health, P.O. Box 162306, Austin TX, 78716, [www.medinstitute.org](http://www.medinstitute.org) I almost wrote, "70% of teenage pregnancies are fathered by *men* over the age of 20" but that would be wrong wouldn't it. They are chronologically men, functionally boys.

<sup>7</sup> Encarta World English Dictionary

**All of which is to say a girl hungry for reassurance may be no match for an older male practiced enough to know what kind of line to feed her. It's simply not a fair contest.**

Of course there are other possibilities when a girl believes she is no longer beautiful in the eyes of others. Our culture is cruel about enforcing the freshness date on prettiness (so please don't imagine girls don't notice when the compliments trail off...). But that's no reason to assume a girl will tumble into the abyss.

Instead of faking it, maybe she'll grow deeper than her skin—which is a good thing. The downside of course is that the credibility of significant adults who said she was *pretty* will come up for review, along with everyone and everything in the culture that contributed to the false sense of self she lived in all those years. Good luck with that.

**But what if I think she *is* pretty?**

Are you paying attention or what? It's not about you or what you think or how you see the world! It's about a girl who can never be filled up with empty praise. Ever.

Did I say that out loud? Sorry. Look, there's nothing wrong with beauty and there's nothing wrong with appreciating beauty. It's just loaded, that's all. It's a firecracker. Handle it wrong and somebody loses a finger.

If you need a refresher course in what it feels like to be judged by the wrong criteria (including what it costs the ones who judge falsely), and if you can tolerate crude humor and what the MPAA ratings like to call *adult language* (and don't say I didn't warn you), go rent the Farrelly Brothers' *Shallow Hal* on DVD. Take time to watch it all the way to the end of the credits. Or dial it back a couple of notches and rent *Shrek*. Or read Dr. Seuss's *Sneetches*; or Hans Christian Andersen's, *The Ugly Ducking*; or the Bible.

And if all this just makes you afraid to say anything, I think I understand that.

I'm not trying to scare you. And I hope you understand I'm not talking about political correctness; I'm talking about being and growing healthy, thoughtful adults. That involves looking past the obvious to the real. It involves learning to identify and express appreciation for what's good and true.

So try this on for size:

## *Thoughtful affirmation is always better than empty praise.*

If you're taking notes that might be worth writing down. And please, I *know* it's obvious. I wouldn't even bring it up except for this annoying tendency to thoughtlessly praise kids for all the wrong reasons. Say it with me: *Praise, bad. Affirmation, good.*

"I like your haircut" is not thoughtless praise, it's an opinion about a choice. Everyone is entitled to an opinion.

"I like your blouse, your dress, your overalls, your glasses, your boots," are all opinions that express your taste. Nothing wrong with that.

"I like your sense of style," is a bit broader. It's a statement of appreciation for an overall trend and that's fine too. At this point, in the spirit of full disclosure, we have to admit that sometimes fashion is not pretty. If history is a reliable predictor you can expect our culture to recycle tasteless fashions several times before you're too old to care. We've endured another bellbottom and polyester renaissance and have to assume that Annie Hall,

**Everyone is  
entitled to an  
opinion.**

flash dance, parachute pants and fluorescents are cuing up for the parade. It hardly matters. As long as it's not intentionally provocative it's just a style. Let it be.

Stick with thoughtful affirmations like "That's a good look on you" unless, of course, the young woman is dressed like a bimbo in which case I'm not sure I can endorse the mixed message. "Hey, LaWanda, you look real slutty today," is probably not the concept you're going for.

While we're at it, why not broaden the scope of affirmation. "You have such pretty eyes" slides off the tongue so easily we know it's empty before we finish saying it. "I think you have pretty eyes" is certainly in the first person so that will score points with your Marriage Encounter presenters but it still has nothing to do with anything. So how about "I'm really intrigued by the way you see the world"? That celebrates what a child does with the eyes in her head. "You are so observant" picks up that theme. "I like the way you make eye contact when we talk" takes it in another positive direction, and "The way you look at me when we talk helps me feel listened-to" builds on that notion.

**"Hey, LaWanda, you look real slutty today," is probably not the concept you're going for.**

Thoughtful affirmation reinforces purposeful behavior (hair care, for example) instead of making flattering statements about happenstance (“pretty” hair). If you think that’s a trivial distinction, think about the different reactions you get from A) telling someone you like her haircut (in which case you’re likely to hear something like “Thank you! I had it done at that wonderful new salon over by the blah, blah, blah), or B) telling someone you really like her *hair* (in which case she’s likely to say she would trade her hair for more or less exactly the opposite of what God and the gene pool gave her— straight for curly; red for blond; blond for brown; brown for black; black for red; curly for straight and so it goes.

The same goes for praising a child because she is a gifted athlete or artist. Being fast is interesting; becoming a dedicated and purposeful runner is fascinating. Possessing a keen eye and sure hand for drawing the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface is a nice trick and maybe even a gift from God; cultivating that to create emotionally arresting canvases is a gift to the rest of us. You are in a unique position to influence the path of giftedness by thoughtfully affirming every appropriate effort from the gifted.

**The point of all this is to get beneath the surface.**

That's where the truth lies. "Beauty's only skin deep," the old saying goes, "but ugly goes clear to the bone." So...for the kids: Let's try not to be ugly about being *pretty*.

**Beauty's only  
skin deep.  
Ugly goes  
clear to the  
bone.**