



**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 06

### “You Can Do Anything You Set Your Mind To”

When Ronald Reagan died, among the thousands viewing his coffin in California was a small boy—four or five years old I’d guess—wearing a t-shirt that said *Future President*. Sweet I thought. *I wonder if he picked it out himself.*

When I was little, adults were always asking *What do you want to be when you grow up?* Which I took to mean *What do you want to do? What will your work be? Cowboy? Fire Fighter? Soldier?*

Another thing I heard big people say a lot: *You can do anything you set your mind to.*

**YOU**  
**Can do**  
**Anything**  
**You**  
**Set Your Mind to!**

It is “In the eyes and attitudes of the parents and teachers who raise and educate them,” Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelson claimed that “children find mirrors through which they define themselves.”<sup>12</sup> To answer the question *Who am I?* children listen first to significant adults. And they tend to believe what they hear. *I’m a princess. I’m a genius. I’m just like my old man. I’m a bum. I am the future. I’m a lost cause. I’m a promise, a disappointment, a diamond in the rough, a waste of space, a star, a miracle, a mistake.*

Over time kids come to trust adults who shoot straight with them in age-appropriate ways. And they learn to distrust adults who are overly critical or overly optimistic—either extreme being an unreliable measure of reality.

**To answer the question *Who am I?* children listen first to significant adults.**

It takes years—sometimes decades—to figure out which is which. Therapists buy sailboats and send their kids to college on the money they make helping people understand what their parents were really saying about them and what they can do about that now. And I don’t believe there’s any shortage of conversation on this subject around the coffee pot at

---

<sup>12</sup> (*Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*, Prima, 1989, page 71).

twelve-step meetings.

Occasionally we hear about someone whose direction in life was recalibrated in a single encounter with an adult—for better or worse. But the effect is mainly cumulative. Kids come to believe what they hear over and over from adults they trust. That's why it's important to think about what we say to children; why it's necessary to find out what we're actually *communicating* by what we say and do.

**Kids come to believe what they hear over and over from adults they trust.**

Which brings us back to the *Future President* t-shirt and the promise that *You can do anything you set your mind to (!)*.

America's baby boom was born in the wake of a world-shaping cultural triumph. The U.S. rose from financial ruin (a little market correction we like to call the Great Depression) to anchor the winning side in a war that threatened half the world. Europe was saved, imperial Japan was dismantled and America seeded the first truly global economy through which she became fabulously wealthy and immensely powerful. Western science and technology broke through barriers at a breathtaking pace. There was nothing America would not attempt and price was

no object for a nation literally printing money. In that climate the notion that America's children of promise could grow up to do anything they set their minds to was an appealing metaphor.

**It was however an expression of irrational exuberance in the economy of childhood — it was an exercise in *over promising* from which we have yet to recover.**

A funny thing happened after dinner one night. It was the end of 1996 and Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank, made a speech that included the now famous words *irrational exuberance*. “But how do we know,” Greenspan mused to his after dinner audience at The American Enterprise Institute, “when irrational exuberance has unduly escalated asset values, blah, blah, blah.” In plain English, Greenspan was raising the possibility that if people get overexcited about investments they might pay too much for stock and then get nervous and bail out; which in turn could lead to a price collapse that takes longer to reverse than anyone expects. He wasn't saying it was going to happen, he was just saying, what if it did?

Half a world away, the Tokyo stock exchange was in session when Greenspan made his remarks, which apparently translated easily into Japanese because the Nikkei responded with a sell off that cost 3% of its value. Hong Kong also dropped 3%. Frankfurt and London fell 4%. New York opened the next morning down 2%.<sup>13</sup> These were relatively small adjustments compared to what was ahead but they hinted at what many people suspected: What you see is not always what you get.

Over promising may be as simple as hushing an impatient child with the promise of candy if he behaves in the grocery store and then renegeing on the deal because it's too near dinnertime.

**You don't get many of those before a child starts to wonder if your word means anything.**

More complicated is the promise *I won't let anything bad happen to you*, when you know good and well you can't deliver on that assurance. *Well I just want Junior to feel safe* the well-meaning liar says. Then tell Junior you'll do everything in your power to keep him safe.

---

<sup>13</sup> (Robert J. Shiller, *Irrational Exuberance*, Princeton University Press, 2000, page 3).

He thinks you have the office next door to God; he thinks you're faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive; he thinks you can beat up T-Rex—or at least *Barney*. *I'll do everything I can to keep you safe* will suffice to make him feel safe. *I won't let anything bad happen* plants seeds of doubt every time Junior skins a knee or walks into a wall. He thought you had that stuff covered. *Where were you!*

These are not days for over promising physical security. "We are," the poet Bruce Cockburn intones, "lovers in a dangerous time." Don't make promises that aren't yours to keep.

More complicated still is the class of enthusiastic over promise represented by the declaration *You can do anything you set your mind to*. *You can grow up to be President!*

I'm going out on a limb here and say the boy in the *Future President* t-shirt will not grow up to be President. Americans elect one president at a time at a rate not exceeding 25 per century. That's not just good arithmetic, it's the law and it narrows the little guy's chances

**Don't  
make  
promises  
that  
aren't  
yours to  
keep.**

considerably. This is the kind of thing you hate to see but I'm afraid the child was misled by well-meaning folk who, in their grief, weren't thinking clearly. Of course I blame the t-shirt company whose greedy cynicism essentially made it impossible for the boy's parents to resist. I haven't ruled out a class action suit and I think I can find an attorney who'll agree with me on this. Should it turn out it was the minor who purchased the shirt, that would be a different matter and all I can say is it's an easy mistake for a four year-old to make.

*You can do anything you set your mind to.* It brings to mind the *No rain* chant at Woodstock uttered with great conviction and hope by half a million in unison just before they got soaked by a summer storm. Wanting was never any guarantee of having and I'm not certain I know what putting my mind to it even means.

## **Desire is important but it's not determinative.**

Positions in professional basketball, baseball, football, hockey, tennis, figure skating and golf are limited. If a young person's only alternatives are making the PGA tour cut or dealing drugs, the smart money has to be on the drugs. The same goes for star turns in the arts, which

explains the large number of talented, hard-working, chronically under-employed actors, writers, musicians, filmmakers and visual artists. What: they're not putting their minds to it? Many of them truly are, I assure you.

I live along one edge of a religious subculture where people in good health tell people who are sick that they ought to pray harder. Pray harder? How do you measure that? Volume? Frequency? Words per minute? Is God watching the playoffs and you have to raise a ruckus to get noticed? I don't think so. I've read the Bible pretty carefully and, if anything, the Bible in general and Jesus in particular discourage that kind of thing. *The pagans think they'll be heard for their many words*, Jesus remarks (I'm paraphrasing from the Gospel According to Matthew, chapter six), *but I'm here to tell you it doesn't work that way; your heavenly father knows what you need before it even occurs to you to ask.*

**Don't get me wrong: I'm all about the praying. The nagging? Not so much.**

Add my name to the list of folks who think misdirection, invention and other forms of lying are poor ways to motivate people of any age. But it's everywhere! Half-truths and outright fabrications in support of good ends because...why? The truth isn't compelling and

people will thank us later for our kindness? I don't think so. I think they'll be mad at us and for good reason. An example from real life: I'm one of those Christians who are just the least bit snippy—I've met others so I know I'm not alone in this—because we think the people who first told us about life with God only told us what they thought were the good parts. They were especially strong on the part about how their lives were “completely changed” after they “met Christ.” Well their lives weren't completely changed at all! Changed in crucial ways, sure, but that wasn't what they said. They said “completely.” So you can imagine our surprise when our lives weren't completely changed after we started trusting Christ. *Surprised* puts it mildly. We were horrified. We were ashamed. We were filled with doubt. Eventually we figured out those people were simply carrying on a time-honored tradition in sales: *Accentuate the positive*. Well God ain't for sale, mister.

I once made a character in a movie ask, “Someone will come to believe the truth because you start with a falsehood? No, no, no; it's not that complicated.” I believe that; I believe the plain truth is just about right. Embellishments

**I believe  
the plain  
truth is  
just  
about  
right.**

needlessly complicate matters.

Which means, I think, that telling kids they can accomplish anything they set their minds to is just about exactly the wrong thing to say since it isn't true and it will inevitably make them question our grasp on reality.

## ON THE OTHER HAND...

This morning I saw a young man in his 20s in a t-shirt that said, "If you can't win, don't play." That's just goofy (unless he was being ironic, in which case it was exceedingly hip).

*Playing* is the point! Stretching, trying, yearning, struggling, slipping, falling, getting back up again—these are the things people do when they're so young they can't even walk but by golly they're gonna learn to walk if they've got anything close to the right number of feet and enough balance to stand up for even a few seconds.

Lacking that, people learn to pull or push from one place to another if they've got any extremities capable of pulling or pushing.

Lacking that, rolling is still a possibility.

People do amazing things by virtue of being people. I've seen toys made by Haitian children too poor to buy bread—little wire and tin contraptions that rolled in the dirt, made strictly for the joy of play by kids for whom joy in possessions or any Euro-American standard of achievement was not in the cards, period. I've seen and heard works of art by people in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Kenya, Tanzania, Thailand, Indonesia and Bolivia who didn't have a table to put food on; who didn't have a pair of shoes; who hardly bother to think of themselves as citizens in any way that would seem significant to the sort of person who registers and votes and doesn't immediately feel afraid when he sees someone in uniform carrying a gun.

Humans do wonderful things by virtue of being human. Not everyone; I'm not saying that. Some people are too damaged or self-absorbed to express much in the way of creativity. Some people use up all their strength staying alive one more day and I give them credit for that. I'm just saying I'm amazed at the remarkable displays of human imagination, invention and ingenuity I've witnessed from folks with darn little to look forward to when the day breaks. I'm among those who think things like that reflect the creativity of the Creator if you

know what I mean.

Winning is not even on the table in the finest human endeavors. It is at most a subsidiary possibility that has almost nothing to do with the passion and pleasure of doing something worthy for its own sake. If being a star is the only thing you believe will bring meaning to life, well...good luck with that. If you transmit that belief to your child, good luck with that too.

There *is* a guarantee you can make to your child. It's not, *You can do anything you set your mind to*. It's this:

**If you think you can, you might. If you think you can't, you won't.**

Trying is a beautiful thing and most courageous when the risk is real because the outcome is uncertain. Risk stimulates a hormone release that makes the heart beat faster and brings the senses alive. It's great! I think children should become accustomed to finding out if they can do the things they think they can do. I'm not talking about sprinting across a busy street—that's no good—but attempting age-appropriate feats of strength, relationship and intellect makes kids resilient, helps them build empathy with others who try and try again,

enables a healthy assessment of personal capabilities and limits. Trying contributes to character.

And to success. People who think they can often find they were right—not always but often enough to keep after it. Backing up a few paragraphs; people learn to walk because they think they can. Part of the reason they think they can walk is that, some time before, they thought they could turn over and they were right. Have you watched that recently? Have you watched an infant figure out how to roll from back to stomach? It's really something. Go volunteer in the infant room at a church nursery for a few Sunday mornings. It's wonderful. If there's a risk-averse adolescent in your life, take him with you. I wouldn't advise using the experience as an excuse for sermonizing but after a couple of mornings in that environment I bet you'll find a conversational way to bring it up.

*If you think you can, you might.* That's just realism talking. It's a message that calls for assessing a person's goals. When the odds of success are long, is it worth it? If you come to realize you don't have what it takes to be a

**If you think  
you can,  
you might.  
That's just  
realism  
talking.**

concert violinist, is it worth the effort to keep fiddling around? The answer to that question is personal and there's nothing wrong with that. There's always the possibility of turning disappointment (*I'll never play Beethoven with the great symphonies*) to unanticipated delight (I'm playing Grapelli in a jazz sextet and it's a whole new thing!).

**Anybody who ever tried to repair a damaged relationship knows there are no guarantees, if only because the other person has to be willing too.**

A leftover regret from my youth is (or rather was) that I never learned the guitar. In 1997 I decided to lay that to rest one way or another. I borrowed a guitar and practiced half an hour or more almost every night for six weeks. At the end of that stretch I knew I would never be as good a player I wanted to be without giving up things I was unwilling to sacrifice.

Here's the thing: Letting go of the whole guitar thing freed up emotional energy to look for another way to make music—which I'm happy to say I found. Today I make music whenever I want.

OK, last thing. Anybody who ever tried to repair a damaged relationship knows there are no guarantees, if only because the other person has to be willing too. Where trust is broken, where the flame of intimacy is

extinguished, where friendship has grown cold; all you can do is try. If you think you can, you might.

If you want to help a youngster (or a spouse or friend for that matter) unlearn fear or overcome the inertia of perfectionism or restore shattered confidence, all you can do is try.

**There are no guarantees but this: If you think you can't, you won't.**