



**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 Eight

“That’s Not How You Do It”

And another thing! Who said there’s only one way to get from Point A to Point B (and it’s your way)?

Who said the only way to fold towels is the way your mother folded them, which is the way her mother and her mother’s mother folded towels for as long as anybody can remember; probably back to the time there were no towels and people just stepped out of the river and air-dried?

Whoa, whoa, wait just a cotton pickin’ minute! Are you telling me a child should go against centuries of tradition and just make it up? Just fold towels any which way? Well I’m sorry but that is not the way things work in the world’s longest surviving democracy. We vote on many things, my friend. We do not vote on towels or the folding thereof. Have I made myself clear? I should think so; thank you very much.

In fact, here, give me the towels and I'll fold them myself until such time as you show proper respect and due diligence in the whole towel and linen area. If you don't mind I think I could use a few minutes to fold in peace. Thank you. Very much.

You know, I can see how it's better if the towels fit in the space where they live when not on active duty. But—and maybe this is just me—they're *towels*. This is not about securing democracy. I'm thinking we could use something like proportional response in the whole towel and linen area.

Ditto the trip across town and, should you be fortunate enough to enjoy the luxury, the dishwasher load-in.

“Get over, get over! Oh, you missed the turn, son. You have to get over sooner or you'll miss it every time. But that's OK; you're new at this. You'll get it down with practice.” With that the Dad glances at his watch and lifts his right foot off the imaginary brake on the passenger side where he's riding today. This dad is a pro. His son is lucky to have him.

That's why he is taken completely by surprise when his son says, “I don't go that way.”

“Excuse me?” the older man says in carefully measured syllables.

“I don’t go that way,” the boy repeats. “I take Magnolia.”

His father is incredulous. “But...it’s *longer*,” he says, something foreboding in the way he elongates the last word.

“I know,” the boy says, missing the point entirely. “Magnolia’s prettier; not as busy. I’m not sure it’s not faster when traffic’s heavy on Baseline.”

His father’s ears are ringing. Did he say *prettier*? Taking a deep breath, what he says is, “It’s good to get comfortable in heavy traffic; you know, get used to it. You may have to drive up in Capital City. You can’t just stop in traffic in Capital City, lemme tell you. You have to be *fluid*; *confident*; you have to *roll* with it. I just think you should learn to move that way here in Springfield; then you’ll know.”

“Are you saying I can go up to Capital City?” the boy asks.

“Nooo, not in my car you can’t,” Pops replies. “You have to learn to swim before you fly.”

“I guess,” the young driver says.

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The old man presses: "What do you mean you're not sure Magnolia's not faster?"

"In heavy traffic, I mean," the boy says.

The experienced one chooses his words carefully. "Driving is more or less a science, son. You can't just guess. It's either faster or it isn't. When you're on your way to the hospital that can make all the difference. Do you see what I'm saying? Do you see that, if Magnolia was faster I would take Magnolia, but I know it isn't? Do you see the flaw here?"

The boy stifles a smile. "I think so. Anyway, the hospital is in the other direction and it's what? A couple of minutes one way or the other where we're going? I just like it better."

A long silence ensues while the older man thinks but wisely does not say, *I don't know who you are...my own son and I don't know who you are...*

Don't even get me started on loading dishwashers.

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And what do you think kids hear when they read between the lines? *I respect you? I value your input? I appreciate your help?* Don't kid yourself. Children recognize this for what it is. Do I really have to spell it out? All right: It's Control. C.O.N.T.R.O.L.

Con•trol Freak, noun

Somebody who feels an excessive need to exert control over people and over his own life (slang)

There's an awful lot of bad blood between parents and their adult children over control. What woman looks forward to having her mother visit if she's going to unilaterally rearrange her kitchen? Or pull the water glasses out of her cabinet and rewash them? And none of this as a gesture of pitching in but unbidden; coming in and just taking over! Throw in a barb like, say...*I don't see how you can stand to drink from those* and most young women would agree the deed rises to the level of a hostile act. *They're not dirty Mom; they're spotted. Its just water. What's your problem?*

Ditto the young man whose father's assessment of his home office is not *Congratulations on keeping overhead low!* but something more along the lines of *I don't know how you get*

anything done in there. How old is that computer? You're not still on a dial up connection are you? How often do those planes fly over? You don't listen to that music all day... You do? How do you concentrate? Is that how you dress for work?

This kind of thing would be difficult to take in any event but the truth is in most cases there's a history that goes back to childhood and has to do with towels or dishwashing or navigating from Point A to Point B or any of a hundred things that hardly matter at all. Most of the time the details of these new episodes are as inconsequential as the ones from childhood. So why for heaven's sake do we allow it to continue?

Well, habit for one thing. It's not easy to give up the expert's role (even when we're no longer experts—even if we never were).

And there's also that control thing.

I've seen parents exercise what I thought was excessive or intrusive control over their children when they—the parents—seemed to be losing control of their own lives. Divorce will do it, as will pressure on the job, loss of a parent, sickness or relational conflict.

I've seen parents panic when it dawned on them that their kids were high school seniors

and still a long way from ready for the real world (there's that bitter phrase again). I've seen those parents crack down on really good kids, imposing curfews where there had been none, demanding higher grades at school when that had never been at issue, turning screws I didn't think needed turning because they were frightened. That's one kind of control. It's fear-based and it drives people to crazy, unnecessary acts that insult and alienate their high-functioning children.

I've also seen parents gripped by the mania to control children who were simply doing their job, which is to say growing up. I suppose that's fear of a more generalized sort—a dread not so much of sending a child into the world unprepared as being unprepared to send a child into the world.

In any case trying to control things that don't much matter is a poor tactic if our long-term goal includes raising people who will *want* to come back to our homes when they are

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adults and want us to come into their homes because we have become such good friends.

Look, if there really is just one right way to fold a towel, make a bed, load a dishwasher or get from Point A to Point B, then it's certainly every parent's responsibility to train his child until he can perform the task exactly that way. But if there's more than one way to accomplish a task, it's a different ball game. Because, when an adolescent hears the words, "That's not how you do it," she thinks, "No; that's not how *you* do it," and the battle of wills is on. But to what end I don't know.

Yes, of course, we have to get from Point A to Point B safely. But I think the adult's real task has less to do with which streets we take and more to do with training his child in problem solving. I mean, what if your child invented a revolutionary way to fold towels or discovered a hidden route across town that reduced traffic gridlock and enhanced the lives of millions of commuters, all because you were open to more than one way of doing things? People would point and whisper reverently, "That's her father." You would be justifiably famous.

when an adolescent hears the words, "That's not how you do it," she thinks, "No; that's not how you do it,"

Or, perhaps more plausibly, what if your son's route took five more minutes and you spent that time talking about life? And what if he loaded the dishwasher so inefficiently that some things wouldn't fit, so you said, "You wash, I'll dry" and stood there together for five minutes hand washing the leftover pots and pans and telling jokes and flicking water at each other and then ran a less than perfect load through the wash? How bad could that be?

If it really matters, then learn to train for it. If it doesn't matter, why get bossy about meaningless details? Why not train for the desired outcome (A to B, clean dishes, towels neatly arranged behind a cabinet door that closes) and leave room for creativity in the process?

Seriously, why not?