



**THINGS
WE
SHOULD
NEVER
SAY TO
KIDS**

JIM HANCOCK

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Thing Nine

“Don’t Make Me Turn This Car Around”

Anybody who’s glared into the rear view mirror and growled “Don’t make me turn this car around” knows what a failure of imagination that is.

For starters, it’s a lame attempt at shifting blame. It’s certainly less offensive than the churlishly violent “She made me hit her” excuse. But it’s about as obvious. Are the kids really supposed to believe they’ve made you turn the car around? Against your will? The fully enfranchised adult? Who do you think you’re kidding? Even young children see this for what it is: *It’s bluffing.*

It’s bluffing.

“Don’t come any closer or I’ll shoot,” the embattled TV heroine warns, the gun shaky in her trembling hands.

“No you won’t,” the villain says, inching forward. And we know he’s right because it’s only the Second Act. This show has a lot of merchandise to sell before they try to get us to reenlist at the top of the hour with something even grittier and more street smart. We are as

surprised as the villain if she pulls the trigger. But not for long. We know he's not dead. We recognize this as a writer's trick. They're trying to throw us so they can surprise us again later. We're not fooled. We may have been born at night, but we weren't born *last* night. We pretty much know a bluff when we see it. It's something we learned as children, from adults who threatened to turn the car around.

Adults who try to bluff children into submission really haven't thought through the whole threat thing in general. By the time you resort to threats (especially if everyone knows you're bluffing) you've turned parenting into a zero sum game. And you've already lost.

**you've
already
lost.**

A Zero-sum game is an exchange with one clear winner and one clear loser and nothing between—like a hand of winner-takes-all poker. In families, zero-sum games are built on the premise that there's not enough to go around. Not enough freedom, not enough money, not enough positive esteem, emotional space, time, fun, not enough room in this house for both of us. So when one person wins (a little self-esteem boost, more freedom, money, prestige, influence, opportunity, whatever) the other loses a

corresponding amount. Zero-sum games are not what you'd call friendly.

I bring this up because understanding a little Game Theory is useful in resolving family conflicts. It's how we know there really just four possible ways to settle competing interests around the household. And here they are:

Win-Win is the outcome in which, as you can guess by the name, everyone ends up happy because nobody has to lose. This is the kind of outcome one expects from a friendly game of golf or one of those outmoded ceremonial wars where the whole point is to shake a few spears, stir up a little dust, make some idle threats and still be home in time for dinner. These are face-saving contests in which everybody gets credit for showing up and no one has to give up the dream of dying in his own bed at a ripe old age. In theory, Win-Win should rule the day in families since blood is thicker than water and we're all in this together and home is where the heart is and however many greeting card sentiments you care to string together. This, sadly, is not the case.

Win-Lose is the outcome in which the one person defeats the other person soundly and we hope without loss of life or property. Running the table in a game of billiards is a Win-

Lose. Drive-by shootings, assassinations, first strikes and high-yield nuclear devices are meant to produce a Win-Lose. The brief tussle between Butch Cassidy and Harvey Logan where Butch ends the fight by kicking the dimwitted Harvey in the groin is a classic screen version of Win-Lose (Sorry if you're the last remaining English-speaking person who hasn't seen *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*—but you've been meaning to rent it—and I ruined the scene for you. It doesn't matter; Harvey ends up being elected governor of Wyoming and leading a happy life even though he walks with a permanent limp and Butch ends up dead in Bolivia—Oops! I did it again).

Lose-Win is the opposite of Win-Lose. Players must consider the possibility of ending the day more like Harvey Logan (who wasn't actually elected governor) than Butch Cassidy. In family-based contests of will (assuming no one is actually killed in the conflict) Lose-Win often gives way to years (years!) of passive aggressive payback.

Lose-Lose describes what Secretary of State Robert McNamara called *mutual assured destruction*—"the capability to destroy the aggressor as a viable society, even after a well planned and executed surprise attack on our forces." People who consciously choose Lose-

Lose are so angry they're willing to endure any amount of punishment to make sure the other person loses. Substance abuse has been known to express Lose-Lose in family systems; so has *retaliatory* pregnancy. Nobody wins at Lose-Lose. I guess that goes without saying.

So the possible outcomes are:

- **Win-Win (we both win)**
- **Win-Lose (I win and you lose)**
- **Lose-Win (I lose and you win)**
- **Lose-Lose (we both lose)**

Can you see how this applies to resolving family conflicts? In the years I spent as a youth worker I applied this model to help me assess just how bad things were in family clashes. In most cases it was pretty easy to get family members on the same page. I mean they were mad all right, but I haven't seen many people committed to a policy of Mutual Assured Destruction with their loved ones. Once we cool down a bit most of us, if we can avoid Lose-Win (I lose-you win), are willing to give up our fantasies of Win-Lose (I win-you lose). And honestly we'd be just as happy to figure out a Win-Win solution since we are after all family.

A couple of times in two decades I encountered adolescents who were so angry that winning was less important than seeing their parents lose. When I pressed them to be sure I understood, they said, yes, I'd heard them right if I thought I heard them say Win-Win was not OK with them because they really wanted their parents to lose. So, if they couldn't score an outright Win-Lose against their parents, they would rather take Lose-Lose than Win-Win.

That's pretty angry.

For what it's worth, once those kids were able to express-themselves clearly they got feedback from their parents that made them believe they were heard and understood. With a bit of mediation we found Win-Win solutions.

I bring all this up because so many family conflicts start out as squabbles about one inconsequential thing or another then escalate suddenly when someone—often a parent—delivers an ultimatum out of proportion to the subject. It happens in moment of frustration or anger and it raises a meaningless border dispute to the level of an invasion. *If you two don't shut up and get in the car right now we're not going!*

Really? You're going back in the house where you already declared you were too hot and tired to cook tonight? So you can...what? Send everyone to bed without supper? If that's really what you intend and the situation warrants the action, I say do it. But if your reaction amounts to little more than an adult tantrum, I'd think twice before I let my low blood sugar talk me into an even less desirable outcome than whatever it was the young'uns did to set me off.

This is why God gave us Time Outs.

Time Out Everybody! Is this something we need to sort out right now or can we go get some dinner and figure it out in air-conditioned comfort? Because I'm tired and hungry and I would sure vote for dinner...or I could just bite your heads off and eat your brains!

If you're grinning when you say that, surely someone in the family will come to your aid—pointing out that, were you counting on the brains of your children for nourishment, it's clear that you would starve.

Part of the job is figuring out how to give kids room to grow and differentiate themselves from the rest of the family without allowing anybody to run roughshod over anybody else in the household. The journey from child to adult, from dependent to interdependent, involves

testing boundaries, pressing limits, pushing the envelop and every other metaphor you can think of that leads to border disputes between parent and child (and, it almost goes without saying, between siblings). How could it be otherwise?

Bluffing and threatening drives that process underground where it's difficult to see, let alone influence. When border conflicts light up, the mature party (that would be you) bears responsibility to redefine the limits without resorting to a full lockdown unless that is absolutely necessary. That may mean affirming the existing boundaries. It may mean redrawing the lines—usually by expanding them appropriately but it's been known to go the other way.

Trick One is looking for the Win-Win and teaching your children to do the same.

Most of us have a little mean streak that's perfectly willing to accept Win-Lose even when we know how much we'd hate being on the Lose-Win side of the deal. Hint: Win-Win is difficult to achieve looking the combatants in the rear view mirror.

Trick Two is creating a consequential environment that makes sense to your child.

Begin with the consequences of being trustworthy, loyal, brave and true: Rewards like trust, freedom, admiration, access to greater resources, increased responsibility. It's a shame when a child (or an adult for that matter) performs admirably and doesn't enjoy these benefits. Seeking Win-Win together has something to do with everybody seeing to it that everybody else gets credit when credit is due.

Of course Win-Win is difficult to achieve when someone is just plain wrong. Creating a consequential environment for your child means that failing to live up to his promises (or trying to work the system to unfair advantage) is tied to *natural* and *reasonable* consequences.

Natural consequences flow directly from behavior. If your growing boy blows his discretionary budget on expensive shoes he may find the natural consequence of spending all the money is not being able to afford movies and pizza for a while. Nothing wrong with that if that's his preference.

There *is* something wrong with bailing him out with a fresh infusion of cash. The way kids learn the value of money and the labor that produces money is by finding out what they can buy with money and what they can't have without it.

The natural consequence of staying up late is fatigue. It doesn't make sense for the rest of the family to tiptoe around a person who is exhausted because he blew off a good night's sleep to play a video game.

Reasonable consequences are tied as nearly as possible to behavior. Since there are no natural consequences for keeping the family waiting, if it's a pattern and your youngster doesn't respond to reason and mutual respect, you may have to invent something. Different things work with different kids. Subtracting minutes from TV viewing, recreational computer use or the weekend curfew may do the trick. Assigning extra duty for hauling younger siblings or running family errands may do it. The important thing in defining reasonable consequences is making them both relevant and reasonable—cutting off fingers to discourage public nose picking may be relevant but it fails the test of reasonableness.

If you doubt the usefulness of reasonable consequences, consider how your state government treats chronic speeders. There are no natural consequences to driving too fast (dangers, yes, but no inevitable consequences). To manage risk, the state imposes stiff and

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escalating penalties on repeat offenders. I've known quite a few speeders; between the pain of fines, rising insurance premiums and the threat of having their license pulled, they eventually get the point.

Which brings us full circle to *Don't make me turn this car around!*

At the risk repeating the chorus of this song one too many times, this whole thing stands or falls on respect—extended by the adult and returned by the child in a generous, life giving exchange. For the most part I think our children are pretty accurate mirrors. Allowing for bad hair days (heck, I've had bad hair *years*) and the possibility that something seriously wrong in the child's life may be revealed by negative patterns (and not merely his own bad hair day)—I think our kids' attitudes and behavior tend to reflect our own. You know: Give respect, get respect. So when I see the kind of craziness in the back seat that makes me want to slam on the brakes and yell *Don't make me turn this car around!* I have to consider the possibility that I started it.

Be that as it may, I'm the big person in the car. So it's my responsibility to address the problem with dignity and respect and an unwavering commitment to Win-win.