

What We Say and What Kids Hear

In our day-to-day conversations, it's important to remember that kids tend to be very literal thinkers. They may not get the joke, sarcasm, euphemism or metaphor. Their understanding is limited to the partial development of their young minds, their emotions, and their life experiences. And sometimes, their feelings impact their perceptions of what they hear more than the words.

What Molly heard:

Seven-year-old Molly overheard her mother, Sandra, tell a friend that she lost her mother a few years ago. Molly was shocked. She had visions of a grandma wandering the streets of some city. How could her mother be so careless?

Molly became a chronic worrier. She watched everything her mother did, sticking close to her side to be sure that her mother didn't misplace her or her baby brother. She didn't want to go to school and leave the baby alone with her mother.

Sandra couldn't figure out Molly's strange behavior until, after lecturing Molly about losing her mittens, Molly said, "Well at least I didn't lose my own Mother."

What Joel heard:

Nine-year-old Joel overheard his parents talking about his and his sister, Jeannie's, report cards.

"Why can't Joel get good grades like his sister?" asked Joel's Dad.

"Maybe Jeannie takes after me and Joel takes after you," teased the Mom.

From this conversation, Joel perceived that Jeannie was smarter than he, that he was like his Dad, and that his Mom was smarter than his Dad. He didn't expect to get good grades after that, and he tended to meet his own expectations.

Quarreling, separated, or divorced parents who openly criticize one another in front of their children, may find that the children take the brunt of the criticism. Also, when adults compare the characteristics of one child to another, the children might internalize and retain, or even exaggerate, those characteristics in a subconscious effort to meet expectations.

What Tessa heard:

Janice and her ex-husband, Rodney, were arguing in the living room, while Tessa waited, unseen, near the door in the adjoining hallway.

"You bring Tessa expensive gifts to buy her off, so you'll feel less guilty about not spending time with her," railed Janice.

"I'd love to spend more time with her," answered Rodney, "But you won't be flexible on the visitation schedule when I have to work weekends!"

After this argument, Tessa doubted her Dad's motives for bringing gifts, and she suspected her mother was trying to keep her and her father apart.

What you say

You can't always protect your kids from overhearing things that confuse or upset them. Even when you carefully monitor your own speech, you can't control what other people say. However, there are things you can do to lessen the risk that kids will be negatively impacted by what they hear. Here are things you can do:

- Remember that kids "feel" situations before they reason through them, so if your manner is not consistent with your words, they'll feel something is wrong. Be honest with them, avoid acting secretive, and don't gossip.
- Use clear, consistent, positive communication. Remember that your criticism

of them can lead them to set low expectations for themselves. Positive, encouraging, and kind remarks about them can lead them to feel better about and expect more of themselves.

- Don't assume that kids aren't paying attention. Most have excellent (and selective) hearing. If you don't want them to hear it, don't say it when they are anywhere within earshot. Better yet, let them overhear you saying positive things. "Johnny's been very cheerful this afternoon; I wish I had the energy to keep up with him." will have a more positive impact on Johnny than, "Johnny's talking my leg off and driving me crazy."
- Avoid hurtful criticizing of the other parent, or even yourself. Young kids are focused on themselves and see parents as two parts of themselves. When a trait of a parent is criticized they take it very personally.
- Be an active listener. Demonstrate interest and respect for your kids. When they feel they have a safe, positive relationship with adults, kids are better able to express feelings, ask important questions, and give parents opportunities to check for misunderstandings or negative feelings before they get out of hand.

Kid troubles? Call the Student Assistance Program and arrange to see a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members. Call (515) 244-6090 or toll free (800) 327-4692. Counselors are on call 24 hours a day.