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Metro Lutheran
Positive Parenting
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T.H.I.N.K., BEFORE YOU SPEAK

When I was growing up, my parents told me to “think before you speak.” It is still good advice. How often I regretted not heeding that advice, when my mouth engaged before my brain joined the party. Thoughtless words inadvertently wounded, made light of a serious concern, revealed a friend’s secret, or touched a nerve. This was not the girl or woman I wanted to be.

A friend’s post on Facebook amplified what my parents meant, inviting me to far greater care with the words I speak or write or post or text. Here are the questions I am learning to ask before I speak. May they become the screen I use before I speak ... and may I pass this on to the next generation.

Would you like to join me, using this simple litmus test to decide what and how you will share things with others? Would you like to join me in figuring out how to teach this to a child you love?

TRUE - “Is it true?” Let this be the first lens. Sometimes, it is tempting to pass on something we’ve just heard, because it is a juicy tidbit or because we’re bored or because we’ve already complained about the weather. Perhaps a broader way to ask the question is, “Is this the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?” If I can see flames licking their way up the wall, by all means, say it! You can see it to confirm the truth.

Parents can ask their child, “Have you seen it or just heard it? Are you absolutely sure that this is what you saw? Is this the story that the other child would tell?”

HELPFUL - “Is it helpful?” Is there anything in the world that the hearer can do about this? Even if it is true, can it change, if I just mention this? Adults are familiar with the question, “Do these pants make me look fat?” Nothing I can say will melt pounds, but I can say, “I love that color on you.” or “Looks like you feel terrific in them.”

Parents can encourage their children to think about this question, when they are tempted to announce a friend’s failing grade on a math test. If it won’t change the outcome, it is not helpful.

INSPIRING - “Is it inspiring?” This invites us to another level. Who is it that needs to be inspired today? Inspired to put down the quick quips, that make you feel witty for a nano-second, but make you feel belittled? Inspire you to look beyond the hurting words to the hurting person who delivered them? Inspire you to be your best person.

Parents can ask children, “Is what you are about to tell other children going to inspire them to be their best selves or see themselves in the best light or are your words intended to hurt and demean and put down those children?”

NECESSARY - “Is it necessary?” Is it mine to tell? Is it important that anyone tell? What will happen if I say nothing? If there is a fire, by all means tell, tell, tell. Use a loud voice. Dial 911. Or is it something that I want to say to see its impact, to let others know that I have some inside knowledge, or to dish dirt on a person with whom I am currently on the outs?

Parents can help children ask themselves the question, “Am I telling to keep someone safe or to get someone in trouble?” This is a question that makes the distinction between tattling and getting help.

KIND - “Is it kind?” This is perhaps the capstone question. Is this encouraging, supportive, and compassionate to the one to whom it is spoken? Does this reflect well on the speaker?

Make sure that you catch your child using words in kind, uplifting ways, and label that behavior as “kind.”

I’d love living in a world in which we all spoke the truth that is helpful, inspiring, necessary, and kind. Together we can build that world.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Try some examples with a child you love. They may come from their experiences or yours. Do them together. Here are some examples:

1. You overhear your next door neighbor ask for a referral to a divorce attorney. Should you say anything to your neighbor or share this with others? It may or may not be “true” that your neighbors are considering a divorce, but it definitely flunks the tests of “helpful,” “inspiring,” “necessary,” or “kind.”
2. Your senior in high school sees a letter of acceptance to their friend’s first choice college. Should she tell others? Yes, it is “true,” “inspiring,” and “kind,” but check first to make sure the friend wants you to share that news. If she really wants to share it herself or is wrestling with whether or not her parents will let her go that far away to school, it is neither “helpful” or “necessary.”
3. When planning your nine year old’s birthday party, a child in your son’s class is not invited. Should your son tell him? Well, it is “true,” but it is not “helpful,” “Inspiring,” “necessary,” nor “kind.”



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4. A
child
new
to

your daughter's kindergarten class wets his pants. Should your daughter announce it to the class? It is "true," but it fails the other four tests. Explore what your daughter could do that would be "helpful" - quietly alert the teacher, "inspiring" - okay, maybe you can't find one for this question, "necessary" and "kind" - how about quietly taking the boy aside and telling him that the teacher has extra pants he could change into, reassuring him that this happens to others, too, then asking him to play at recess.

5. Your four year old tells you that your toddler is trying to put a fork in an electric outlet. Yes, yes, yes, it is "true," "helpful," "necessary," and "kind" (and we'll save "inspiring" for another day). Make sure you catch your kids using all five questions well. Now, that will be "inspiring."