

Dad, Your Child Is Desperate for These 4 Verbal Essentials From You

Women, as a rule, are more verbal than men. But in your family, *you* are the great communicator. Every day—wherever you are, even when you are absent—you communicate something powerful, because to your child, nothing you say or do is neutral.

The words you speak around your children are powerful and impact them more than you know. Even if you're talking about your children when they're not in the room, what you believe about them shows up in what you say about them and will shape them more than you could ever imagine. I know this from experience.

In September 1979, my father spoke a single sentence that changed my life. I had graduated from Mt. Holyoke College earlier in the year and had been rejected from several medical schools, so I was living at home pondering Plan B. One evening, on my way upstairs, I overheard my father talking to a friend on the phone.

"Yes," he was saying. "They really do grow up fast, don't they? I'm excited to tell you that my daughter, Meg, will be starting medical school next fall. She's not quite sure where, though." My head went hot. What was he saying? Medical school? I'd just received a handful of rejections. I'll be going to medical school next fall? How can he say that? What does he know that I don't?

My father believed something about me that I couldn't yet believe myself. Not only did he believe it, but he, a doctor himself, put his reputation on the line in front of his friend.

As I backed away from the door, my heart rate doubled. I felt thrilled and excited, because my father's confidence gave me hope. And sure enough, in fall 1980, I started medical school, just as my father had said.

The bottom line for you fathers is quite simple: your words, body language and presence can determine your child's outlook *every day*. Your kids might not tell you that but as their pediatrician that's what they've told me. They take everything you do and say as a reflection on them and how they should feel and react. Their identity is still forming and they are constantly looking to you to tell them who they are. As the great communicator dad, you need to make sure you tell them the right things.

Dad, if you're reading this and thinking, *I'm really no good at communicating. I don't even know where to start*—don't worry! I have four essentials of great fatherly communication for you. Just think **CAAR** (I expand on each of these points in my book):

C – Correction

A – Affirmation

A – Attention

R – Respect

Let's start with **Correction**. When correcting a child, use the fewest words possible. Your toddler only knows a few words anyway, and as she grows older, she'll tune out long speeches of correction. All kids do this, because if you correct them at length they feel ashamed, hurt and embarrassed. In self-defense, they try to stop listening. Using fewer words also keeps your temper in check. Anger has a habit of escalating, so cut yourself off. Stop talking. Leave the room (and don't slam the door).

Next, **Affirmation**. Dads, you may find it easier to affirm your daughter than your son. But he needs affirmation from you, too. What exactly do I mean by affirmation? Start with vocally communicating how valuable they are to you (and to God). To express affirmation, use what I call “power words.” They help build character. For instance, tell your son that he is (pick one): strong, kind, capable, patient, loving, lovable, valuable, considerate, smart, courageous, persistent or tenacious. Be sure to invoke yourself and say, “I admire you, respect you, love you, believe in you, care about you and have confidence in you.”

Attention. Your relationship with your children is dependent on the attention you give them—and they want your attention desperately, because it makes them feel important and because they have important things they want to share with the most important person in their lives, whether that something is a movie or a personal triumph or simply the joy of playing in the yard or the basement. What kind of attention? Let’s start with the basics:

1. Make eye contact when spending time with your child. Put down your phone and be fully engaged.
2. Your kids have so much to say and share with you. This means you should be talking less and listening more. Show them you value their thoughts, imagination, ideas and opinions.
3. Be available. Whenever possible, as soon as your child comes in asking for your help or your time, give it to them. They are just looking to see if they are loved, valued and seen by the person they love and respect most in the world.

And lastly, **Respect**. It can be frustrating when your children give you attitude and don’t give you the respect that they should. I’ve mentioned frequently in my practice that more is caught than taught. You have to model respect to them. Teaching respect doesn’t have to be a battle, and it doesn’t

mean you have to act like a drill sergeant. In fact, you shouldn't, because quiet discipline, speaking in a strong, firm, respectful tone, is the best way to get the same response back. Kids respect strength, and self-control is a great example of strength—one that your kids will want to emulate if they see it in you. Simply put, if you want respect from your kids, show it to them.

If you choose your words wisely, if you aim to be a respectful, attentive, affectionate, affirming dad who cares enough for his kids to be their calm and rational disciplinarian when necessary, you will be the hero that your kids want you to be in word and deed. {eoa}

*Pediatrician, mother, and best-selling author of six books, **Dr. Meg Meeker** is the country's leading authority on parenting, teens and children's health. Her current book, Hero: Being the Strong Father Your Children Need (Regnery Publishing), is available now. Dr. Meeker is a Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics, certified by The American Board of Pediatrics and serves on the Advisory Board of The Medical Institute. She is an active part of the NFL's Fatherhood Initiative and is a regular speaker at Dave Ramsey's Smart Conferences.*