

Mrs Dowdell's Parenting Pointers

Our child's inner voice



When my godson was born, I was reminded of just how incredible babies are. When this little chap was only a few weeks old I had my first conversation with him. I said things to him and he made noises and smiled back, we had quite a chat! Even very young babies respond to what we say and how we say it. In fact, the way that we speak to our children becomes their "inner voice" as they grow up. How can we make sure that the voice that our children listen to in their heads is building their self-esteem?

We can probably all remember things that our parents, other family members or teachers said about us. "Oh, he's just shy", "You are just like your father", "She's always getting into trouble". Many of us internalise those voices and continue to believe those statements well into adulthood, even when they are no longer true. A sobering thought but worth considering when we think about how we speak around our children. As I've said many times before, whether we like it or not, we are the biggest influence in our children's lives so what they hear us say about them matters. Wouldn't it be great if as our children grow, what they hear is "I'm proud of you", "You tried hard", "That was a really kind thing to do"?

And it's not just what we say, it's the way we say it too. My little godson didn't understand what was being said to him but he responded to the tone of my voice. If we only speak to our children in raised or openly aggressive voices, they will learn to speak like that too. How many times have we got sucked into an argument, our child raises their voice, we raise ours in response and before we know it everyone is shouting at each other. We need to learn to speak with our children respectfully, even when they make us feel really mad. This can be hard for us, especially if we haven't had good examples ourselves. With practice, we can learn how we can be firm, without having to shout or threaten. (Do come and chat with me if this is an area you'd like help with.)

Each morning, when we say goodbye to our children, they may be replaying everything we've said about them that day. This may be only subconsciously but if we've had a challenging morning and lost our temper, our child's inner voice may be telling them that they are "no good" and this impacts on their day at school. Children who feel bad about themselves may struggle to have the confidence to learn new skills or to develop the resilience to navigate friendships. They will be feeling more stressed and this may lead them to either withdraw or lash out. We all have difficult mornings when things don't go well, but we need to think really carefully about how we deal with that. We can acknowledge to our children that it wasn't great but still tell them that we love them and hope they have a good day. If mornings are consistently challenging perhaps everyone needs to work together to come up with a new plan.

Having read this article, many of us may now have a typical case of parent's guilt. I know there have been many times when I've said unhelpful things to my children. If you will allow me to be your inner voice for a moment ... You don't have to be a perfect parent, you just have to be good enough. We all make mistakes, you can try again tomorrow.

To get in touch, email me at parenting@foundrylanepimary.co.uk

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