



## OH THOSE CHALLENGING KIDS – WHAT TO SAY, NOT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT

Page 1 of 4

By Linda Ranson Jacobs

04/20/2012



He comes in with a haughty look on his face. His face says,

*“Heh, heh, this is the day you will pay for my unhappiness!”*

You smile and maintain your integrity. You say a quick prayer (always seek the Lord) as you approach this child. (“God give me wisdom and knowledge that I may lead this people...” 2 Chronicles 1:10a). You tell yourself you are safe. Your self-talk says you are in control and you will not lose it no matter what. You are prepared and feel

confident in your ability to assist and teach this child and draw him closer to the Lord.

He doesn’t wait for you but skirts over to the side of the room. However, he keeps his eyes on you. What do you do at this point? You let him go. I would nod my head in his direction to let him know I saw him. I might mouth, “I see you” and wink as I say it. Then I go on about my business and leave him alone.

You know this child is going to need your attention at some point in the next hour. You need to also realize that being gushy or fake with these children will never work. These types of kids are very perceptive. You see they have learned at an early age how to read body language. They have to be cognizant in reading body language so they know how to live and fit into two different homes with two parents who are sometimes at war with each other.

Be careful how you approach these children. Some adults think because a child’s family life is disruptive, the child needs their pity. Children don’t need your pity. They need your empathy. They need boundaries. They need structure within the confines of a loving environment. They need for you to be an adult they can depend upon and trust. They need for you to give them dignity. Kids deserve their dignity, and too many adults in their lives have taken their dignity away. They need to be able to count on you, the adult, to be in charge, to be the leader, to be in control not controlling but in control.

Maya Angelou once said,

*“People won’t remember what you said. People won’t remember what you did. People will remember how you made them feel.”*

This is so very true of the child of divorce. Keep foremost in your mind how you make these kids feel.





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Page 2 of 4

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### ***Tell Them What to Do***

When working with children, tell them what you want them to do. Example: “Sit down and look at the video.” You don’t give them a choice if it is what is supposed to happen. Leave off the word, “Okay?” at the end of the request. “Okay?” means you are asking their permission to tell them to sit down.

Do not tack on a “please” or a “thank you.” “Please sit down and watch the video. Thank you.” Please and thank you turn what you want them to do into a request and inadvertently gives them a choice. If it is not a choice, don’t use “please” or “thank you.” Children who have relationship issues, such as kids of divorce, will have trouble with the words “please” and “thank you.” These words could conjure up feelings of unfairness and the hurting child might set out to purposely be rude and negative. This may be a hard concept for many leaders, but leave the issues of manners to another time. You can model manners later when the child is healed and not turned inward to their problems.

### ***Assertive voice***

Use your assertive voice. The assertive voice is the voice of knowing and an “in charge” voice. It is the “this is the way things are” voice. “Susie, sit still!” You don’t say it in a condescending tone. You don’t say it in an apologetic tone. You don’t say it in a “you better do this or else” tone. Simply say, “Susie, sit still.”

When the child does what you tell him or her, then say, “You did it.” Or, “Look at you!” These comments have no judgment, but describe what the child did. Do not say, “Good job.” Your purpose is not to judge the child’s performance but to simply confirm what they did.

### ***Use the child’s name***

You may have noticed in the conversation above that the child’s name was used each time when the leader was talking to the child. Research tells us that hearing one’s own name in everyday situations is an attention grabber. It causes a sudden rise in our own self-awareness. Using PET scans, researchers were able to see what happens in the brain when people hear their first name. There was an increase in blood flow to the part of the brain that plays a role in our processing of “self” (Perrin, F. et al. [2005] *Neuropsychologia*, Vol 43[1], 12–19).

### ***Mistakes from the past***

For years many people who work with children have said things like:





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- (1) "I'm sorry. It's not time to talk" or

Why would the child care if you were sorry or not? The only thing using this phrase does is to give the child power over us. The child might think, "Wow, I can make this adult sorry!" And they will set out to do it for the rest of the class time.

- (2) "I need for you to listen" or

Your brain takes you literally to what it hears. If you say, "I need for you to listen," the word "need" takes you literally to YOUR NEED, and then when the child doesn't sit down. In other words it is your need not the child's need. Why would the child care if your need is met or not? These kids have adults in their lives that have a lot of needs so they don't want to be bothered my meeting your needs. You are supposed to be there to meet their needs.

- (3) "I want you to pay attention."

When you say, "I want you to listen," it's the same thing. Your brain is telling you what YOU WANT.

Instead of any of these, simply say the NAME and then the VERB. For example:

NAME	VERB
David	Walk to the circle.
Kyra	Watch the video.
Sam	Sit still.

For some of these children when they make a mistake, just acknowledge the mistake and move on. After making eye contact, simply shrug your shoulders with the look that says, "So you blew it." There are no repercussions, just some attention and validation that says, "Hey kid, you really messed up. Now shake it off. Move on. Try again. You can do it."

Short phrases that work well with some of these kids are, "Oh well!" Another word that conveys empathy and sympathy but doesn't take ownership of the problem is "Bummer!" with a lot of expression.

When an accident happens such as a spilled glass of water say, "Bummer!" If you say with exasperation, "Now look what you did! Go get a paper towel and clean this up." You are belittling the child. He knows what he did and he also knows that getting a paper towel is what he needs to do to clean it up. If you say, "Bummer. What





## OH THOSE CHALLENGING KIDS – WHAT TO SAY, NOT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT

Page 4 of 4

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do you need to do now” you allow the child to maintain his dignity. He also has to think through what to do at this point. More than anything else though, is the fact that you trust him to figure this out on his own.

In order for these things to work, you will need to be able to keep your mouth quiet and not say anything more. This can be very difficult.

*“Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.” Psalm 141:3 (NIV).*

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda’s website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\) \[http://www.hlp4.com\]](http://www.hlp4.com). Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at [Linda@hlp4.com](mailto:Linda@hlp4.com).*

