

Yesterday in the grocery store I heard a father call his son a “stupid loudmouth”. The father was angry, the child humiliated and it broke my heart. I am sorry for the father’s anger, but sorrier for what his lack of skills and control might be doing to his young son. The most important thing a parent can do for their children is to send positive messages about their value as a person. In fact, parents have more influence in this area than anyone else. While the father’s words reflected his frustration or mood, that young boy may have taken it as a statement about his value as a person.

In her absolutely wonderful book, Your Child’s Self Esteem, Dorothy Briggs tells parents they are “ a psychological mirror that your child uses to build his identity. And his whole life is affected by the conclusion he draws.” The child accepts the image of himself that the parent reflects. No matter how inaccurate a parent’s reflection, the child trusts it, believes it and owns what he sees in that reflection. His parent’s view of who he is defines him. If a parent reflects a loving, competent child, that is how the child sees himself. If a parent reflects a “stupid loudmouth” or problem image to the child, that is what the child sees himself to be.

For me, one of the scariest things about parenthood has always been this idea that what I do and say carries such tremendous weight with my children. It is a huge responsibility to be the architect of the self images of young and vulnerable lives. The words we say to and about them, the looks we give them, and even the way we touch them teaches them something about themselves. It is awesome.

And yet, the words we use, the things we do, often are more about how we are feeling about ourselves. A bad day, a frustrating child, a difficult boss etc, are some of the everyday things that may cause us to snap, or even explode at our child. It may or may not be about the child at all. And yet our kids don’t have the experience to know this—to be able to step back and say “Wow, Dad sure is having a bad day today. That must be why he is calling me names.” On the contrary, kids always think it is a statement about them. ALWAYS.

However, according to Briggs, single or infrequent negative reflections won’t cause permanent damage. What counts is the total number of messages and their intensity. If there are more positive reflections, the child gets the positive message and self esteem grows. As humans, we all have those days when we are snappy or short and often our kids are on the receiving end. A good thing to do on those days might be to acknowledge your own feelings to your kids. “I am sorry. I am angry at things that went on at work today and I did not mean to take it out on you.” That way you correct any negative reflection you might send. And to further protect your relationship and their self images, be sure to “front load” the relationship with positive talk, touch and looks when you aren’t stressed so that the total number of positive reflections outnumber the negative by huge amounts.

That way it’s win-win. You get to be human and have a bad day and still raise a child who sees himself as capable, lovable and worthwhile.