



Say what you mean, mean what you say...

WITHOUT HURTING OTHERS



We say, “You should say what you mean, and mean what you say.” Does that make it okay to utter whatever rushes to your mind? No, it doesn’t. True, you should say what you mean. And, yes, mean what you say. But, how you say it – what words and tone you use – matters. As far as possible, your words should not hurt anyone.

What if the other person hurts you first? Out of anger, someone says to you, “I hate you!” Almost automatically, you lash back, “I hate you ten times more!” That then **elicits** a verbal back and forth of put downs. Before you know it, you have punched each other hard with your harsh words. And, both of you feel emotionally bruised.

Not your fault, you say. The other person started it. But, in the end, what happened? The exchange of words hurt both ways – an unhealthy trap to fall into. This trap has been around for centuries. It is born out of the ancient “eye-for-an-eye” belief. People who think it is fair to hit back often quote the saying, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”

This was a law created by King Hammurabi of Babylon. It was meant to serve justice: when something wrong was done, the victim was entitled to only that amount of revenge. Apply that to “I hate you” and it means that you can only reply, “I hate you as much (not more).” And, that would be playing fair when you take revenge. Although being fair is important, doing what is right comes first.

NOT an eye for an eye

King Hammurabi lived nearly 4,000 years ago. Human societies think differently today about what is right and wrong.

One world leader who inspired that change was Mahatma Gandhi who led India to independence. Gandhi believed that all violence was wrong, including verbal aggression. His response to Hammurabi's law was: "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind."

At this point, an eye-for-an-eye fan might argue, "But, we're talking about words here. They're only words after all."

Words are not empty sounds we make. Words carry meaning, and meaning has power. Doing what is right includes using your word power wisely.

Use word power wisely

What choices do you have if you do not want to hurl back a harsh reply when someone is rude or hateful to you? Here are some ways that other kids and teens have found useful:

When people hurt you, tell them so. You could simply say, "Ouch, that hurts." Most people will get the message. If they didn't mean to hurt you, they would feel sorry and apologise.

What if they tease you unkindly or crack jokes that put you down? Then, knowing what to say gets trickier. Saying "Ouch, that hurts" may give them a big thrill because they wanted to upset you in the first place. Instead, using a pleasant tone, tell them to stop. You could say: "Stop teasing. I don't like it."; "That joke is not funny."; "Let's talk about something that doesn't put down anyone."; "Time to change the topic. Surely we have other stuff to talk about."

Confidently, change the topic. This works especially when there are other kids in the group who are not happy about you being teased or put down. They will be relieved when you give them a way to make everything right again.

Walk away calmly. You might say something like "Time to leave. This isn't fun for me. So, bye." or "Excuse me, I don't need this. Have a good day." Be nice for two reasons: it might just be contagious and turn the mean kids into kinder people; and that would make you feel great!

Look for friends who don't put you down, friends who like you just the way you are. If you don't have any like that yet, tell yourself, "They are out there somewhere, just waiting for me to be their friend."

Tell an adult – a parent, grandparent, teacher, counsellor or any older person you trust – about the unkind teasing, mean jokes and verbal bullying. Ask them for help.

There is an exception to this advice about not using hurtful words. The be-nice rule doesn't apply when someone is so bad to you that you are not safe anymore. At times like that, do or say whatever will help you to get out of the situation. Then, tell a trustworthy adult about it.

Don't be a fighter cock

So far, we have been assuming that everyone reading this is a peace-loving person who would never deliberately be unkind to anyone. But, perhaps you aren't like that. What if you are the verbal bully who enjoys mocking others? Or, who loves starting a quarrel just for the fun of it? In kampong language, you would be called a fighter cock.

Anyone who has seen a real-life cock fight will be able to tell you what happens in the end. In traditional cock fights, both roosters are losers: they get hurt very badly and sometimes one – or even both – die fighting. Apply that as a metaphor for verbal aggression and you would see what goes wrong when human beings hurt one another with their words. That is why it makes more sense to always speak in kind and caring ways.

– By MARY GEORGE

VOCABULARY **elicits** (say “il-liss-its”; verb) = brings out or evokes.

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