

The Real Freedom of Speech

By Radha Selvester, Community Outreach/Safe Place Specialist for CDS Family & Behavioral Health Services

I recently came across guidelines for filtering speech that really ought to apply to everyone – children, parents, teachers, and even politicians. There were variations on this theme credited to Sufis, Chinese, British Mums, and even the Bhagavad-Gita. Some describe these guidelines as gates. Don't let the words being thought in the brain out through the gate of the mouth unless they are TRUE, BENEFICIAL, and KIND.

Teaching children to control their impulse to blurt out every thought that comes to mind is not easy, but well worth the endeavor. When they are old enough to understand the concept of TRUTH, parents need to show encouragement for speaking the truth even if it means confessing to making a mistake. As in all parent-child communications remember to accept all feelings (not necessarily all behaviors of course). Some children are afraid of punishment for making mistakes and try to lie their way out of it. Discourage this by reducing consequences for honest confessions. Establishing this policy with young children could potentially save their lives as they go through adolescence. Wouldn't you rather have your teen admit to you he is dabbling with drugs so you can have a solution oriented conversation and create an action plan – rather than lie and not get help?

There are truths that just aren't BENEFICIAL. Chastisements that start with, "You should have . . ." are good examples. "You should have cleaned your room last night so you would be able to play with your friend today" or "You should have consulted a hair-dresser before taking a pair of scissors to your own hair." Again, empathizing with the feelings is comforting and allows children to learn from their mistakes. "It's disappointing to have to delay a play date because of neglected responsibilities" or "You're not happy about the way your hair looks." (Hug) True and beneficial speech helps to build closer relationships.

As Thumper (from Bambi) quotes from his father, "If you can't say something nice, don't say 'nothin' at all." Little words of KINDNESS throughout the day make the world a better place. Compliment words and actions and appearances whenever possible. There are ways to praise even when the situation isn't 100% to your liking. Praise the 90% you do appreciate. "I like the way you were quick to wipe up the spilled milk before it got all over the floor." (Overlooking the plaids and stripes combination) "The blues and greens in your shorts & shirt remind me of the ocean." It helps to praise while kids are doing well – even when you know (from experience) it won't last! "It's hard to sit in this waiting room for such a long time. You have been practicing patience for ten minutes. Shall we find a book to read or would you rather color?" (This last statement incorporates accepting feelings, descriptive praise, and offering a choice to engage cooperation. The trick is to say this BEFORE your child approaches melt down!)

Even though freedom of speech means we can physically say whatever we want, to obtain the best consequences of our speech, we need to model and teach these principles. Speak what is TRUE, BENEFICIAL, and KIND. Family relations will improve and the world will truly become a better place.

Having communication challenges with your children? Call CDS Family & Behavioral Health Services. CDS offers free Family Action counseling for children age 6-17 and a residential program at CDS Interface Youth Shelter (age 10-17). Call (352) 244-0628 or 0618. www.cdsfl.org