

DR JUSTIN COULSON

ISSUE 3 | TERM 3 | 2023

## Our words matter

For close to 200 years, children have sung in the schoolyard:

*“Sticks and stones may break my bones  
But words shall never hurt me.”*

We all know that’s not true.

However, it’s not just cruel words that have the capacity to hurt. Sometimes as parents, we surprisingly hurt our children in the way we offer praise or correction. Here’s what I mean:

A few months ago, I read *The Absorbent Mind* by Maria Montessori. While I didn’t agree with all of it, and there were some ideas that wouldn’t fly today, there were plenty of enlightening moments. One thing that stood out was the idea of *not* correcting children. Yes, you read that right: *not* correcting children.

Montessori recognises that this makes no sense.

“How can we improve the children’s work if we do not correct the errors?” she imagines us asking.

She goes on to explain that when teachers remove themselves from the role of hovering over children to point out their errors, the child is empowered to grow by correcting their own errors. For example, when a child is learning to walk, they don’t need us to point out every time that they fall. They are already inclined to move towards progressive improvement, without us pointing out everything they are doing wrong.

It is easy to step back and ignore errors at an early age. It is much harder to hold back from offering correction as our children grow. However, our corrections, no matter how gentle, can have unintended consequences.

We might think that we need to correct our kids when they hit the brakes too aggressively in the car, when they forget to pack their lunch box, or when they play a truly awful self-composed guitar solo.

But what would happen if we didn’t?

Wouldn’t it be possible that they would learn for themselves given time?

Mightn’t they already know that they need to improve?

Is it possible that they would also be able to retain their creativity, and find joy in pushing boundaries and experimenting with new things?

I am certain that we can answer yes to all of the above. And decades of psychological research tells us that the answer is yes. My new book, *The Parenting Revolution*, explores all of that research and helps us understand *why* this matters.

Nevertheless, it is not only words of correction that can hamper a child's creative process. Words of praise can have a similar effect.

When we praise our children's accomplishments in a way that focuses on the outcome, we may stifle their desires to work towards improvement. After all, if we're already happy with the way they performed on the exam, why would they need to work on making a better one? They may become less likely to take risks and extend themselves, for fear of losing our approbation.

Similarly, if the praise we offer is superficial, such as by simply saying "good job", or "well done", or even "what a clever kid you are!", our children don't feel seen. Their efforts go unnoticed, and we lose out on helping them appreciate the growth that happened in the learning and creating process.

We sometimes create praise junkies, unwilling to try anything without our approval. In some cases, they infer that they must not be good at something. If they were, we wouldn't feel a 'need' to praise them!

So what are we to do? No correction, no praise? What on earth are we meant to say next time our children shows us their latest "success"?

Try this:

- Narration. Talk through what you see, without judgement, noticing the little details. "I heard you practicing your scales on the guitar."
- Ask for their opinion. Intrinsic motivation is far more powerful than extrinsic motivation, and we help them get to their intrinsic motivation by prioritising their opinion over ours. "How do you feel about the song you're writing?"
- Express gratitude. A sincere thank you never fails. "Thank you for sharing your love of music with us."
- Say what you see. Describe the emotions you see in your child as a result of what they have done. "I love seeing how happy you are when you're practicing guitar."

Much like sticks and stones, words can be powerful. Through them, we can help our children develop a love of learning, a willingness to experiment, and foster their creativity.

Our words matter.



**AUTHOR**

**Dr Justin Coulson**

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit [happyfamilies.com.au](http://happyfamilies.com.au).