

## Stopping Emotional Pollution for Children ~ Seven Practices From Kidpower

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Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit [www.kidpower.org](http://www.kidpower.org).

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Recently, a loving, creative teacher said to me, "I am leading a summer acting program with a group of middle school children who keep making nasty remarks about each other and about me. It takes away the joy of my work with them!"

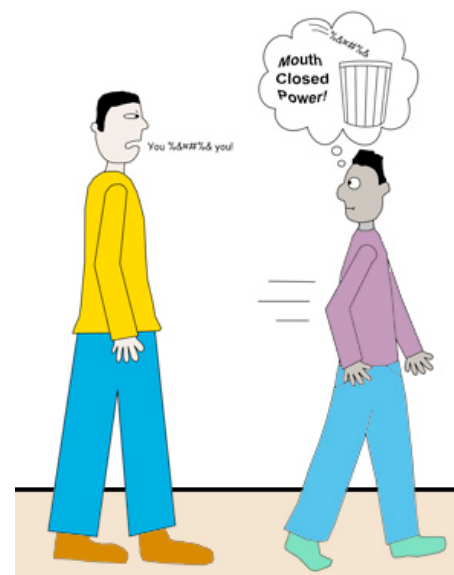
Another teacher who runs a terrific summer nature program overheard her and said, "We have the same problem! It started with just a couple of kids, but suddenly, it's as if we have an epidemic of meanness!"

In an evaluation of one community's aftercare programs, over half of the children reported that they felt unsafe at times because of the constant level of putdowns.

We hear the same stories in families. "My children seem to think that being mean is being funny," one mother worried. "I hate it, but I also don't want to overreact."

At Kidpower, we believe that unkind remarks are like emotional pollution. They don't usually cause people to get visibly injured right away, but they diminish the quality of life and can be damaging to health and well-being over time.

Just as with other actions that affect health and safety, we believe speaking and acting respectfully should *not* be a matter of choice. Adults are responsible for noticing when children are being hurtful with words and for responding quickly, effectively, and clearly. We believe that adults need to take charge of their children's emotional environment with clear rules and boundaries and to model being powerful, positive leaders themselves.



*Using Mouth Closed Power*

It is normal for children to discover that words have power and to experiment with negative uses of that power. It is the job of adults to take charge of creating environments that are both emotionally and physically safe for everyone. We would not allow children to throw rocks through the window right in front of us, and we can stop unkind words that can create emotional damage with the same level of commitment.

**Here are seven basic practices that families and youth groups can use to help stop emotional pollution:**

- 1) **Establish rules that help protect emotional and physical safety.** For younger children, rules can be expressed in very simple terms, such as, "We don't hit each other or threaten each other. We don't break things on purpose. We stay together. We don't climb up something without asking first. We don't make hurtful comments. If someone says or does something that is hurtful to us, we speak up in a strong, respectful way. If we make mistakes, we apologize and try to do better. If we have problems, we get help." For older children and teens, adults can express the intention to protect all forms of safety for everyone and then lead them in developing specific rules together.
- 2) **Give children safe outlets for expressing their feelings and discussing their thoughts.** We believe that children have the right to their feelings and beliefs and that they can learn how and when to express these in ways that are not harmful to others. They need safe outlets where they don't have to be careful in how they express themselves in order to figure out what is okay to say or do and what is not.

Attacking remarks and behavior can be hurtful and are likely to make problems bigger rather than better. However, being upset at times is normal and is not necessarily disrespectful. Not liking someone at times is also normal and not disrespectful. Telling someone in a polite way what you don't like that they are doing is also not disrespectful. Figuring out what is and is not safe is complicated, which is why it is important for children to be able to talk in private with adults they trust about all their feelings and thoughts.

- 3) **Teach children that they can feel one way inside and act another.** We work on managing behavior rather than making assumptions about intentions. Three very useful Kidpower behavior management skills are Mouth Closed Power, Hands Down Power, and Walk Away Power. We have children practice imagining that they are really upset and want to say something really mean and squeezing their lips together to stop themselves instead. We also have children imagine that they are about to hit or shove someone or to touch someone or something they shouldn't and instead using the power of their bodies to pull their hands to their sides. For Walk Away Power, we coach children to notice when someone's behavior might be about to lead to trouble and then walk away to a safer place.
- 4) **Teach children to protect their feelings.** Often, hurtful remarks are made in response to real or perceived hurtful behavior from others. The Kidpower Trash Can is probably our most famous emotional safety technique and has been used effectively by people of all ages and abilities from a wide range of cultures. To use this technique, put a hand on your hip and imagine that the hole it makes is a trash can. The next time you say something mean to yourself or someone says something mean to you, catch the hurtful words with your other hand and throw them into the "trash can" – and then put your hand on your heart and say something nice to yourself. Other techniques we teach are to imagine an emotional raincoat protecting you in stormy weather, to imagine a screen that lets in useful information but keeps out insults, and to be persistent in getting help.

- 5) **Put a spotlight on positive behavior.** Instead of taking caring, respectful behavior for granted, notice and thank children when they are giving compliments, being appreciative, being helpful, and otherwise behaving in ways that we want to see more of. Think of having a garden with plants that need sunlight, water, and rich soil in which to grow. Our attention is like the sunlight that can help positive behavior to grow.

Make sure that your appreciation both to a group and to an individual child is authentic, with a sincere intention to express that you are glad about this positive behavior. Do your best to spread your appreciation evenly among children rather than constantly singling one child out. If need be, create opportunities for children who are struggling with behaving appropriately to do things in ways that will justify your authentic appreciation.

Occasionally, adults will thank one child in front of a whole group in a very exaggerated way that is likely to lead the other children to believe that, rather than saying something honestly kind about the individual child, the intent is indirectly to criticize everyone else in the group. Any kind of inauthentic appreciation can harm relationships, so take care to ensure that your intentions are clear.

- 6) **Intervene quickly, strongly, and respectfully as soon as a problem starts to surface.** It is normal for some children to test boundaries, and most people make mistakes at times.

Keep your radar on and notice when children start to become annoyed or upset with each other. Be ready to step in with coaching in the moment on how to re-state a comment so that it is a respectful boundary rather than an insulting remark or to redirect children who are acting out towards more positive behavior.

Be prepared with language to uphold the rules, such as, "Wait! Use your polite words. You can say, 'Excuse me! It's MY turn! You can use this when I'm done.'" Or, "OUCH! Comments that attack my intentions or character or competence are hurtful. Please re-state what you do and don't like using an 'I-Message.'" Or, "You've already told me you are bored. Please use your Mouth Closed Power and refrain from discussing this further."

Even if the child who was being insulted says that it's just a game, remind them of the Kidpower boundary principles that play needs to be okay with the people involved, safe, *and* allowed by the adults in charge. Say that you do not allow games like that when children are with you.

- 7) **Give the logical consequence of practicing safety when children create emotional pollution.** Lecturing children doesn't do a lot of good, and it is often beyond an adult's power to know who started the negative interaction. Instead, state the problem in very short terms and then have all parties involved practice the skills that could have prevented this problem. This is a logical consequence that is not harmful, even though it might make some children indignant. You are not trying to judge from conflicting stories about who started the problem – you just want children to *show* you that they know these skills well enough to remember to use them.

For example, "Putdowns about how someone looks are hurtful and not allowed here. I want you to apologize for each hurtful thing you said or did no matter who started it, say something positive about each other, and then show me what Mouth Closed Power, Hands Down Power, and Walk Away Power look like." Coach children to do this in a firm, respectful way. If they act silly or refuse, insist that they stop all fun activities and keep giving new chances until they are ready to show you that they know how to prevent emotional pollution.

*Using these seven practices can prevent a host of problems and can teach children that you are 'walking your talk' in terms of your commitment to creating a safe, caring, respectful environment for everyone.*

For more ideas on how to speak up and on positive responses to defensive reactions, please see our article on [Speaking Up About Putdowns](#).

For more ideas about adults taking charge, please see [Create Emotional Safety ~ Be a Powerful Positive Adult Leader](#).

For an example of rules made by teenagers, please see [Make Safety and Respect The Way It Is](#).