

Speaking Up About Putdowns

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.

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When someone is saying something that is hurtful or rude, speaking up takes courage. Speaking up takes the skills of knowing the words to say and how to deal with negative reactions. Finally, speaking up takes wisdom, because there are times when speaking up is a mistake. If a dangerous person is insulting you or others when there is no adult around who can help you to stay safe, the best plan is to leave.

What is a Putdown?

A putdown is an insulting remark that "puts down" another person. Whether a putdown is directed at themselves or at someone else, young people and adults need to understand that stopping putdowns with their family, friends, colleagues, and classmates is like stopping pollution or littering. It might not always be possible, but it is important to try when we can. If we get mad and start insulting the person who is making the putdown remarks, this is like adding to the pollution. Instead, we can learn to speak up in ways that are polite and clear.

Common putdowns include laughing, making rude gestures or sounds, mimicking, and saying insulting things to make someone feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, or ashamed. Putdowns also include making negative remarks about someone behind her or his back for the purpose of getting others to think less of this person. This is different than speaking up about a problem to get help, because the purpose is not to find a solution, but to be hurtful to this person.

Ways to Speak Up

In Kidpower, depending on the nature of the putdown and the ages of our students, responses that we might have young people practice include:

- "That's not funny. Please stop."
- "That's a mean thing to say. I don't like it."
- "That's not cool."
- "What purpose does it serve to say that? It sounds like an insult."
- "That's disrespectful. Please stop."
- "That's prejudice. That's not acceptable to me."
- "That's a mean thing to do. Stop or I'll leave."
- "That's bullying. We promised not to do that and I want to keep our promises."
- "That's dishonorable. You are a better person than that."

We also help young people come up with "I" statements such as, "I feel sad when you say unkind things about people. Please stop."

Dealing with Defensive Reactions

Most people don't like being told what to do, which is why we prepare our students to persist in speaking up. Common defensive reactions and possible responses include:

The Sense of Humor Reaction: Can't you take a joke?

Possible Response: That was unkind. Being hurtful to people is not funny to me.

The Belittling Reaction: You're over-reacting. You're oversensitive.

Possible Response: Perhaps. All the same, I feel uncomfortable when you make comments like that. Let's talk about something else instead.

The Innocent Reaction: But he/she is not even here. So what does it matter?

Possible Response: It makes people think less of her/him. Being mean behind someone's back does not make it less mean.

The Being Factual Reaction: I was just stating my honest opinion. It's a free country.

Possible Response: If someone used words like that about you, my honest opinion is that you would feel attacked.

The Being Helpful Reaction: I was just trying to be helpful. Can't you handle the truth?

Possible Response: When you put down something that a person cannot change, it is not helpful. When you use rude words to tell me you don't like something that I might or might not decide to change, that is not helpful.

The Blaming Reaction: It's your fault. I had to say this because you made me mad.

Possible Response: If you say rude things, this is your responsibility. It is not anyone's fault but your own. You can explain why you are unhappy another time.

The Changing the Subject Reaction: You are really wrong because you _____ (a completely unrelated complaint.) Possible Response: You are changing the subject. You can complain about what I did later, but right now I want you to stop saying mean things.

The Threatening Reaction: I'll make you sorry that you said that.

Possible Response: Stop or I'll leave. Stop or I'll tell. (Or just leaving and getting help without saying anything further to this person.)

The Denial Reaction: I never said that. That's not what I meant.

Possible Response: (If there is any possibility that you are wrong) If that is true, then I apologize for believing that you would say something so awful. (If this is something that happens repeatedly) I have a different memory about this than you do. So, does this mean that you agree that that would be an awful thing to say?

As soon as they can understand these ideas, young people delight in recognizing defensive reactions. After overcoming some initial resistance sometimes, they are usually relieved when they have the chance to practice the words to say out loud to speak up and to persist.

Walking Our Talk

Like me, you might recognize yourself as well as other people in some of defensive reactions described above. Respectful communication takes hard work from everyone involved. If we want to stop young people from using putdowns, we adults must stop making putdowns ourselves. Especially because it is hard, it is important to show children that we can listen respectfully when someone feels insulted by our actions or words. We don't have to agree, but we do need to show that we are willing to understand other points of view.

No matter what our intentions were, if someone was insulted or hurt by something we said or did, we can say, "I am sorry for saying this in a way that was hurtful." If we were wrong, we can say, "I was wrong. That was a dumb thing for me to say. I am sorry." If we were expressing a valid concern, we can say, "I did not mean to hurt your feelings, but I do need to tell you about this problem. Is there a way that I can say it that you will not find insulting?"

Seeing adults do this is tremendously educational for their children.

Adults can tell children as soon as they are old enough to understand, "None of us are perfect and all of us make mistakes. When someone does not like something that you say or do, it can feel upsetting. Instead of saying something back right away, you can learn to get centered and to listen. Try to ask questions until you can understand why the other person is unhappy with you. Even if you don't agree, you can say that you are sorry for hurting someone's feelings."