



Say It! Don't Spray It

A Washing of the Word

My little brother used to get in my face to tell me about some fabulous thing he'd accomplished. By the time he finished his enthusiastic narration, I needed a handkerchief to wipe my face off. This, of course, prompted my irritated retort, "Say it! Don't spray it!" Poor Tommy just wanted to share his excitement, but my sharp tone left him wounded and deflated.

Whether directed at a brother or a child, words can have a tremendous impact on our relationships. They can spell the difference between building up or tearing down.

Ephesians 4:29 says, No rotten talk should come from your mouth, but only what is good for the building up of someone in need, in order to give grace to those who hear. So here is some food for thought: Give grace-undeserved favor-to your stepchild with your words. Try saying, not spraying, compliments and encouragement to a child who may be carrying a load of emotion magnified by teen hormones.

Stepparents are often the recipient of teenage spray, and I was no exception. In our blended family of six children, (three mine and three his), we always had teenagers spewing verbal overspray. My first reaction was to snap back with a quick reprimand and add it to the storehouse of resentments I was building toward my stepchildren. Positive comments were far and few between, so obviously, my stepdaughters weren't being edified?and our relationship was deteriorating.

Because my relationship with them was waning, my relationship with my husband suffered as well. There was a slow but steady digression from the happy family we envisioned when we married.

I didn't like the tension at home or the ugly feelings building in my heart, so I took my burden to God. My prayer was similar to Solomon's in 1 Kings 3, only I asked for a discerning heart as a parent. Because I had a lot of emotional junk, I looked for Scriptures on cleansing. I came across this simple phrase in Ephesians 5:26, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word.



Jesus cleansed His bride, the church, through the washing of the Word. It was undeserved grace. I recognized that if I had been cleansed by the Word, I needed to extend the same grace to my stepchildren through my words. So I began to wash my kids down with uplifting words.

I noticed the little things. I thanked Sarah for putting her cereal bowl in the sink. I complimented the way Mandi fixed her hair. Jodie got a verbal pat on the back for a good grade on a math test. Little things that had gone unacknowledged in the past turned into accolades, and the girls responded positively toward me.

The second step in this word-washing was to rethink my responses when my stepchildren came to me for permission to do something. Because of my resentments, I hadn't realized I was giving a quick "no" to almost everything. As a result, they avoided asking me and went to their dad instead.

I began to think through each request, (big and small) by asking, "Can I say 'yes' to this?" If the request didn't violate our rules or interfere with schoolwork, I could give an affirmative nod.

Once my the girls realized I was trying to be more fair, they began coming to me first, before their dad. They also began to respect a "no" more readily because they knew it was justified. They didn't always like it, but they did respect it.

Giving permission, compliments, and encouragement was relatively easy, but the big test was remaining cool in the face of those teenage spewings.

I once read a story about a writer who researched Amish people for an article. "Observing several kids at a schoolyard, he noted that they never screamed or yelled. This amazed him, so he asked the schoolmaster. In response, the schoolmaster simply replied, 'Well, have you ever heard an Amish adult yell?' "¹

As a parent, I set the example. Keeping my temper (and tongue) under control sets the tone for any conversation. James called the tongue "a fire" (Jas. 3:6), and there will be times when you're a word away from setting off a major forest fire. In those situations, you might do well to follow Abraham Lincoln's lead. When Lincoln was irritated, he would write two letters. The first letter allowed him to say everything that was on his mind. The second was tactful and discreet. When he was done, he would mail the second letter and destroy the first.²



Personally, I wrote in my journal in the form of a prayer. By venting these feelings to God, I was free to hear from Him, forgive my stepchild, and make sound judgments with a cool head.

Probably the most important way I extended grace with my words was through prayer. Instead of complaining about my stepchildren, I began praying for them. I trusted Him to do the work of changing my heart and my stepdaughters' hearts.

Sure, our family still has normal altercations from time to time; baggy jeans dragging on the ground, curfew violations, hogging the phone, and picking clothes up off the floor. But after learning to "say it, not spray it!" by washing my stepchildren with fresh and gracious words, I saw dramatic changes. The bitterness began to disappear, and we blended into a family.

1. *Jay Carty, Counter Attack (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1988), 44.*
2. *John Luther in Bits & Pieces, October 1990.*

Cleaning up your act

Parenting means setting the example, and that includes blended families. Follow these steps to edify your teen by extending grace with your words.

1. Wash them down with uplifting words. Compliment and encourage.
2. Think through each and every request to see if you can say "yes." Don't allow resentments to cloud your judgment.
3. When conversations heat up, keep your cool and your tongue under control. Vent your feelings to the Lord, rather than at your kids.
4. Pray earnestly for your kids. God will do the rest.