

Chapter 25

The Power of Your Words

A long time ago there was a small village in northern New York. A small boy had caught a terrible chest cold. In a few days time he had a raging fever. His parents feared that he was too young and small to recover. The village doctor was away on business. People came and gave advice but nothing helped.

Not knowing how else to help, the boy's parents finally called for an elderly villager who had the reputation of being extremely wise. The man came. He sat with the boy for some time. Then he took the boy in his arms and whispered into his ears. The boy stirred and smiled at the man.

As the man was leaving he told the boy's parents that the boy would be fine soon. An uncle of the boy's stood in the way of the old man. The uncle said, "How do you think that a few words are going to heal this boy? Are you crazy?" The old man, who was known never to say an unkind word to anyone, responded, "You are a real fool."

The uncle fell into a screaming frenzy over the old man's insult. His face grew red. His eyes grew dark. He clenched his hands into fists and said, "How can you insult me in such a way? I demand an apology!"

Finally, after the uncle had calmed down, the old man spoke. He said, "If a few words have the power to make an otherwise clever man like yourself fall into a fit of rage, then surely a few words can have the power to heal."

The Words Say a Lot

That little story is told in many parts of the world, and has many different variations. We made that one up just for you. Each version of the story has the same meaning—words are very powerful. The words you use will tell other people what you think and how you feel. Since we cannot read each others' minds, we have

to listen and speak carefully in order to communicate clearly. A single word or even intonation can make the difference between life and death, a positive or a negative outcome, hurt feelings or understanding.

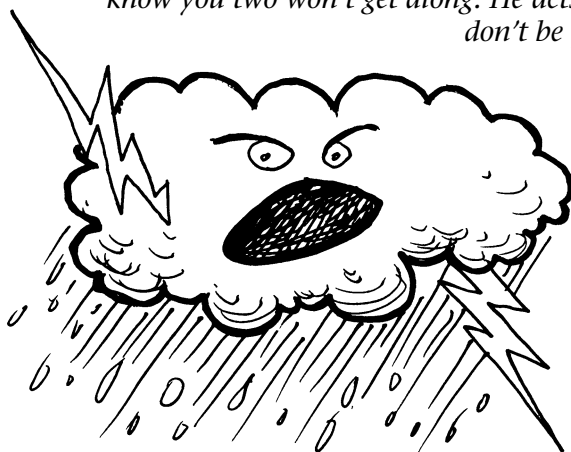
Have you ever thought about how people use words? Have you ever noticed the way different people talk? Do you know a person who rarely complains? Do you know someone who is always complaining? Or someone who is very fair? Or someone who blames others? How about a person who speaks well of others? How about a person who curses a lot? The kind of language a person uses tells other people about that person. If a teacher walked into your classroom cursing and complaining about everything, you might think he had lost his mind! You expect certain people to speak to others in a certain way.

What kind of words do you use, and how do you use them?

Creating a Climate

Words create an atmosphere. By using your words carefully, you create an accurate picture for someone else. Sometimes people say things about other people that are misleading. It is important not to exaggerate or tell white lies about others or you will create the wrong idea. One boy had a problem with being jealous. He was afraid that when his two closest friends met, they would become friends themselves and leave him out. This is what he told both of his friends:

He doesn't have any other friends because he gets on everyone's nerves. I'm just friends with him because I feel kinda sorry for him. I know you two won't get along. He acts really nice at first, so don't be fooled.



After a while the boy's friends realized that they had been misled. They did become friends. The first boy lost out by using his words to paint the wrong picture. He ended up without either of his friends.

Likewise, when

you talk you create an impression with your words. You show people how you feel by the way you talk. We encourage you to be honest. You don't have to tell people that someone is a wonderful person if you know that the person tends to be rude and impatient. However, when you do speak about others, be honest about your impressions. As the expression goes, *tell it like it is*.

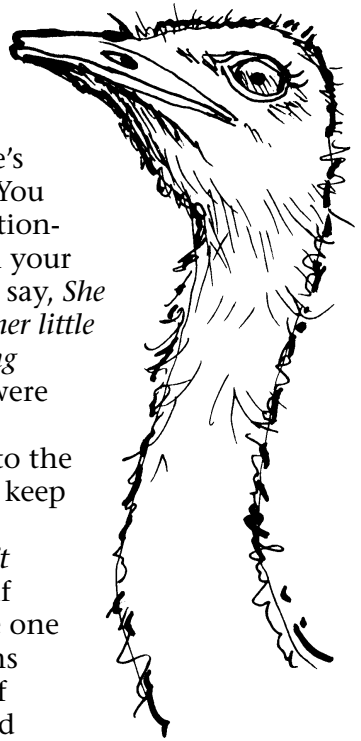
Gossip is for the Birds

Here is a temptation that most people fall into at one time or another—gossip! Why do people like to talk about other people so much? Maybe it's fun and interesting to know all of the details of everyone else's life, but it is not an activity we recommend. You see, gossiping hurts people and damages relationships. Imagine walking around the corner on your way to lunch just in time to hear your friend say, *She has been so grouchy lately. I think she's mad at her little brother because he told her mom that she's failing math!* In fact, you told your friend that you were failing math and that your brother told your mom. Now your friend has spilled the news to the rest of her friends when she was supposed to keep her mouth shut!

You might be thinking that *what you don't know can't hurt you!* But how would you feel if the tables were turned? Suddenly you are the one they are gossiping about. One of the problems with gossip is that it often takes a small bit of truth, like *he feels dizzy before eating lunch*, and turns it into a big story: *He went fishing last weekend and got pulled into the water by a huge fish on his line. His dad had to rescue him because as he was falling into the water he hit his head on the side of the boat and started to drown. Ever since he's felt dizzy before eating lunch (especially when they're serving fish)!*

Gossip usually consists of some small bit of truth, and lots of exaggerations to make the story more interesting. Although it may all seem like fun, gossip often damages or even ruins good relationships. Many times the seed of the gossip is a thread of truth passed from one friend to the other in secrecy.

Overall, we suggest that you leave gossiping to the birds. We



don't recommend gossiping; it is a hurtful pastime. Here are some simple guidelines you may want to consider using:

- ☉ *Don't say things about others that you would not like to hear others say about you.*
- ☉ *Think twice before you speak.*
- ☉ *If someone doesn't gossip about other people you can trust that he isn't gossiping about you.*
- ☉ *Don't say anything about a person that you wouldn't feel comfortable saying in front of him.*

Words of Encouragement

Have you ever known anyone—a friend, a relative, a teacher or someone in your community—who always knew what to say to make you feel better? Being able to use words to encourage other people is a skill. We are not talking about simply saying nice things here and there, or telling every third person you see that he looks nice or you like his new haircut. We are talking about expressing the good you see in others and learning to use your words in a constructive way.

We asked some teens what encouraging things people had said to them in the past, and here is what two of them said:

The nicest thing anyone ever said to me was from a friend. She told me that no matter how bad I thought I was she knew I was a nice person and that she would always care.

Christian

When I was in the eighth grade I used to get nervous when a writing assignment was mentioned; I had a lot of trouble writing. One of my



teachers wrote in my yearbook that I could do anything and that I should believe in myself. She said that she was proud of how well I had done that year. I felt like I could face writing after that.

Sherri

What is the nicest thing anyone ever said to you? When is the last time you said something to encourage a friend or someone you care about? Imagine that today was your last chance to say the good things you thought about the people close to you. What would you say? Do you take for granted that other people know how you feel? It may not be so. A few kind words can make someone else's day!

- ☺ *Thanks, I appreciate your help.*
- ☺ *I'm lucky to have a friend like you.*
- ☺ *You are good at seeing things in a different way!*

Words that Hurt

Just as you can use your words to make someone's day, you can also use your words to hurt others. In fact, words are so powerful that some people think of them as tools. These tools can be used to build people up or tear them down. When we asked students what was the worst thing someone ever said to them, they all remembered it immediately. Why is it that people are more likely to recall unkind words than kind words?

Students remembered being called *stupid*, or *useless*, *slow* or *boring*. Although someone else may have said these things carelessly, not really meaning them, the words stuck. One student told us how she felt when someone called her stupid. She said that the person who said it was actually a friend, and was *just joking*.

What you hear may not affect you at the moment but once you go home and start to think about it your heart starts to pound, your world starts to fall down, and you feel terrible. No one needs to be talked to that way, no matter who you are.

Ann Marie

Remember that your words tell other people about you—how you feel and what you think. A person may not show you how he feels, but we doubt that ugly words are easily forgotten by most people. Always think twice before you speak. Someone else's feelings may be at stake.

How a Few Words Can Change Lives

Here is a story that took place in a New York City school some years ago.

Not so long ago there was a class of teenage boys. The boys were considered to be nearly a lost cause. They had gone through several teachers and were only half way through the year. No one could bear to try to teach them. They behaved terribly. With the last of the series of short-term teachers, the principal assigned a permanent security guard to the classroom for protection. Even with the presence of the security guard, the teacher quit after a few weeks. In total despair the principal hired a teacher who had many years of experience behind her, and who was also a senior citizen. He had great doubts about her taking on this challenging group of boys. He felt almost sure that she, like all the others, would quit. How could this elderly lady manage such a group?

The first thing the teacher did was to dismiss the security guard. At the end of the year the teacher had managed to make a total success out of the class. The boys not only learned to cooperate but they also did their work—with great results! The principal was so overwhelmed by this teacher's achievements, with the once unruly class, that he asked her to give a speech at an end-of-the-year assembly. She told the audience that she was hesitant about taking the class at first, but that the principal had made a good decision when he gave her a sheet of paper listing the IQ scores of all of the boys in the class. When she read through the boys' IQ scores, she knew that they were exceptionally bright and that she could teach them anything. So she did.

After the teacher stepped down from the podium the principal approached it haltingly. He stood in front of the student body, and many of their parents, and announced: The sheet of paper I gave her was actually the boys' locker numbers, and not their IQ scores.

Why Do You Say What You Say?

You may never have thought about this little point before, but why do you say the things you say? Hum, that seems obvious. You talk to communicate—to tell others what you think, feel and know.

Sometimes people talk for another reason. They talk to make themselves look bigger than they feel. They want other people to be impressed with who they have met, what has happened to them or what they know. We have a name for people who brag about what they know. We call them *know-it-alls*. In class, students usually mumble things like, *Here goes Mr. Know-It-All*, when such a person starts to talk. People are not impressed by know-it-alls. Their purpose for sharing their knowledge is to make themselves look good. Sometimes they even try to make other people feel stu-

pid or inadequate. It is easy to tell the difference between a know-it-all and someone who is sincerely trying to share knowledge. We think that you can tell the difference as well.

When someone brags or has a habit of exaggerating stories, how do you feel? Does it lower your opinion of a person when they seem to always be *talking big*? Are you very impressed with someone who talks in order to make you think more highly of them?

There is the other side of the coin. Some people are very honest. They don't exaggerate and they do not try to create a distorted picture when they talk. They want you to know how things really happened, and their true place in a story. We all know people like this. Who do you believe more? The one who uses words to paint a better picture, or the one who is straightforward?

Just a little something to think about.

Journal

"Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?



To Do

1. In pairs, think of a time when you used your words to describe another person or a place to someone else. What kind of picture do you think you painted of that person or that place in their mind? What kind of words did you use? How would you have changed their ideas about what you told them if you used different words?
2. Make a list of words that you would like to hear spoken to you or about you; make a list of words that you would not like to hear spoken to you or about you. Look over your two lists and ask yourself: *from my two lists which words do I use myself to talk about others most often?*
3. Some situations are completely turned around because of the use of words. Can you think of such a situation (it may be a personal situation or something that you heard about through the news)? Do you think that the teacher in the story above would have believed in the boys as strongly as she did if she did not think that they were very smart?





Key Ideas

- ☉ Words have the power to encourage people or to hurt people, depending on how they are used.
- ☉ Gossip is a destructive activity.
- ☉ Speak of others the way you would like others to speak of you.

**Controlling your tongue is one of the
greatest challenges you will ever face.**

Anonymous