

## COMMENTARY

# What not to say can be important

How often do we hear something fall from a person's mouth and wonder to ourselves, "Did he really just say that?"

Whether rude, offensive or just plain stupid, it seems that everywhere I turn, there's someone saying something I wish they hadn't, especially in front of my kids.

As a parent, I feel it's my duty to help ensure that my kids are none of these people.

Now I'll admit, when I was younger, I wouldn't have been anyone's first choice for "tact coaching." Blessed with a quick wit but cursed with a low tolerance for morons, I was never slow to tell someone that they were too stupid or rude to reproduce.

Like many things, my response to the manners-challenged individuals of the world has changed. I find myself choking back questions like, "If I gave you a book on decent human etiquette, would you be able to read it?"

I don't know when is the correct age to start teaching kids good manners, but it's hard with kids. Babies, for example, communicate with two ideas in mind: "I need something. And I need it now."

They're not trying to ruin a solemn moment with their ear-splitting screams. They're just asking for help.

"Hellooooo? Can't anyone else smell that? I need a new

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diaper!"

A few short years later, the kids find humor in other people's gas. The occasional accidental "toot" brings uproarious laughter and comments like, "Dude, gross."

"Sorry," the tooter says innocently, "I didn't try. It just slipped out!"

Stopping the girl before any more details of the wind-breaking were given, I explained that gassiness is one of those things we just don't talk about.

"You may think it's funny now," I explain. "But you won't think so when it's the guy sitting next to you on a long plane ride."

Believe me, I know.

It's one of the many things we just don't say or talk about — at least not in public.

There are, of course, the "naughty words." Friends say I'm a little over-the-top in this category, because my approach has been to designate even the most mildly off-color words as bad. This way, the really bad words are completely unthinkable.

How proud I was when

my daughter overheard a friend saying "crap" and whispered to me, "Ooohhh, she's naughty!"

Sadly, there's no shortage of examples with unsavory vocabularies. Even more sad is the places they turn up.

This past Fourth of July, we went to a park to watch fireworks. We were surrounded by citizens immersed in the spirit of Independence Day, exercising their freedom of speech by taking profanity to a whole new level.

How proud the Founding Fathers would be to know their sacrifices paved the way for people of all ages to use the "f-word" so many times in a single sentence.

Despite being surrounded by these potty-mouth-poets, neither of the girls said a word about it. I'm confident they felt that even acknowledging it might cause them to vaporize on the spot. And I'm fine with that.

Then there are the non-naughty-yet-still-forbidden topics, questions and comments. This category is a tough one to teach the kids. Questions born of a small child's innocence may be cute. The same questions from a teenager or grown-up are rude or offensive.

Questions, for example, about age. Daughter No. 2 plays softball with kids one to three years older than she is. So I'm OK with her asking one of her teammates,

"How old are you?" In this case, I'm thinking, "Great. She's making new friends, not intimidated by age, no problem."

It's a little different story when I'm sitting at a baseball game with friends who look about the same age as I do, and a person asks me, "Are these your parents?" In this situation, I'm thinking, "Did you really just say that?"

It was fun watching her face change from one shade of red to another as she swiftly glued both her hands to her face, sealing off her mouth as if to prevent anything more embarrassing from spilling out.

But I got to wondering if either of my girls heard the ridiculous question. The appalled expression on Daughter No. 1's face told me she did.

So I asked, "You understand that this is one of those things you just don't say, right?"

"Yup!" She replied, "It's like 'Hey, are you pregnant or just fat?' Or, 'Gee, what's that big brown thing on your face?' Or, 'Wow, those pants make your butt look big.' Right?"

OK, the big-butt one is more for my list of things not to say. But believe me, if someone asked her, she'd know just what to say.

"Those pants? They look fabulous!"