

“Because I Said So!”

BY RACHELI SOFER



How terrible were the “old-style” parenting phrases with which many of us were raised—and which we are now told to never employ when talking to our children? In the olden days (at least in our memories), parents routinely asserted their authority, and most kids didn’t dare to argue or challenge that assertion.

AmiLiving presented a list of the most common lines to the experts, and asked them their opinions:

- “What were you thinking?” : “What’s wrong with you?”
- “Why? Because I’m your mother.” : “You’re a bad boy!”
- “If you don’t stop crying, I’ll give you something to cry about!” : “You have to obey me.”
- “You should be ashamed of yourself.” : “Why can’t you be good, like Shloimy down the block?”
- “If you don’t do it now, you’re in big trouble!” : “Don’t you ever think before acting?”
- “Because I said so!” : “What’s the matter with you?”
- “Why are you doing this to me?” : “Who do you think you are?”
- “How could you be so stupid?” : “How dare you!”

While many of these phrases seem like no-brainers and need no comment, our respondents felt that some still contain practical wisdom.

Rabbi Shmuel Gluck,

director of Arevim, an organization that “facilitates the health of the family unit by focusing on teenagers and their parents”:

Before I offer my thoughts, I would like to introduce the idea that tone, body language and the general relationship between parent and child all significantly affect whether a phrase is helpful or destructive. However, since most parents believe that the relationship with their children is healthier than their children’s assessment of it, my response will assume an environment that is slightly in distress.

Mrs. Simi Yellin

has been positively transforming homes through her teleconference parenting classes and private consultations for over a decade. Her new 10-week series, “Raise-the-Bar Parenting,” empowers parents to raise respectful, responsible and cooperative children through curtailing arguing, *chutzpah*, and other negative behaviors we have come to tolerate:

The take-home message here is not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. The idea of traditional parenting, where the parents are in charge and are *mechanech* their kids without being afraid of their reactions and without second-guessing themselves, is how things should be! A lot of the *halachos* of *kibbud av v’eim* that are largely ignored today stem from this basic misconception that we have to worry so much about being nice to our kids. Yet really today, it is a much greater concern that our kids are not nice to us. Teaching our children to listen to authority is a necessary component of parenting. This doesn’t need to be done with harshness. Even 30 years ago many of these phrases weren’t productive and only damaged relationships. Nowadays, mothers are more focused on walking on eggshells around their kids, but it’s very burdensome because it isn’t natural. So while the “old school” methodology has a lot of redeeming qualities to it, a lot of these phrases are counterproductive.

“What were you thinking?”

RSG: This phrase is intended to insult. The underlying goal is to make the person feel “less” by intimidating him into complying with what the parents consider normal expectations. When the child is younger it works, although even then it plants negative seeds and the children see the parents as angry, arrogant or some other negative trait. If the message is repeated frequently and the children come to believe that, their parents become irrelevant.

SY: This depends on the tone. It’s not productive to be derogatory and make a child feel bad. If you’re asking a real question as a gateway to understanding the child’s mind-set then it’s okay, but not to insult him.

“Why? Because I said so.”

RSG: I firmly believe that the days of “Because I said so” are over. Many *sefarim* highlight the importance of explaining things if you want people to listen and work together with you to achieve a mutual goal. There are certainly things beyond a child’s comprehension, such as why he can’t have a cell phone at the age of 12, but even then it should be said softly and not “Because I’m the boss.” Children do not respond well to that. For a parent’s response to be considered good *chinuch* it must eliminate resentment which would otherwise increase resistance, which the phrase “Because I said so” can cause.

SY: This is the only phrase in the list that doesn’t repulse me. The more you are able to explain, the more your kids will learn. But sometimes it’s fine not to give a reason if you don’t want to. Kids should listen simply because their parents said so. The *halachos* of *kibbud av v’eim* haven’t changed, but they aren’t taught in this generation. We live in fear of our kids going off the *derech*, with the result that so much negative behavior is overlooked in the name of a warm and cushy relationship. But the overall objective should be raising kids who are *yarei shamayim* and know how to cope with life.

“Why? Because I’m your mother.”

RSG: I always tell parents, “The more you remind them that you’re their parents, the more they’ll forget. The less you remind them, the more they’ll remember.” Children are people. No one wants to be reminded that he is dependent, even subservient to others. Children are sensitive; they feel things more acutely than parents think.

SY: Same as above, but don’t overuse it because it won’t be productive. The idea behind it is okay. Kids should not be arguing with parents, so *hashkafah*-wise the phrase isn’t wrong. But in a once-in-a-blue-moon situation where you don’t want to explain yourself, you can use this.

“If you don’t stop crying, I’ll give you something to cry about!”

RSG: Children tell me all the time that their parents have no idea what’s going on in their heads. This comment illustrates that. Children also complain that their parents are too self-involved and not considerate enough of them. Children often think that their parents’ requests are less motivated by their children’s well-being in mind, than by their selfish wants and needs. Whether that is true or not, this comment reinforces those fears.

“You should be ashamed of yourself.”

RSG: Since when has making fun of a person motivated anyone? This statement requires parents to forget that their children are also people with feelings, fears, aspirations, concerns and hopes. Such comments make it clear to children that their parents are unaware of that.

SY: This is not productive. When kids don’t act appropriately it’s better to hold up a mirror so they can see themselves and what they are doing. It’s much better to say, “Do you think it’s okay to talk like that?” or “Do you think this is what Hashem wants?” Phrasing it in terms of being ashamed isn’t the way to do it.

“If you don’t do it now, you’re in big trouble!”

SY: There’s a difference between being in charge and being threatening. It is therefore preferable to say, “It’s going to be a problem.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

RSG: Making assumptions that children who are naturally careless, forgetful or selfish are out to get anyone just isn’t true—and children know it. Comments that are off the mark create a division between children and their parents. In addition, acting like a martyr makes children lose respect for their parents, just like threats that are wildly out of proportion.

Parents must remember that the only control parents ever had is the children’s belief that they had control. In extreme, although not so uncommon circumstances, kids wakes up one morning and say, “I don’t have to listen to my parents.” Then what? If he doesn’t go to school, his parents can’t really do anything. Everyone has a friend with a car, an apartment or irresponsible parents. Your child can just walk out. Talking to them as if you have total control is a mistake. Your children, consciously or subconsciously, will look down on you or even ridicule you. You are, again, planting negative seeds.

SY: Effective parenting puts kids, not parents, in the center. It motivates what’s best for the kids. Children intuitively know whose interests are at stake.

“You’re a bad boy!”

SY: Don’t label the child. How will he ever improve if he is already categorized? The message is, “You aren’t bad, although you may have done something bad.” *“Elokai neshamah shenasata bi taborah bi—Hashem, the soul You have given me is pure.”* You want to motivate your child to behave in consonance with his inner goodness.

“Don’t you ever think before acting?”

SY: It’s not so bad to ask a kid who has trouble with impulse control, “Did you think before you did that?” but not phrased like this. It’s okay if you’re asking to understand the kid better.

“You have to obey me.”

SY: “Obey” is outdated. People don’t respond to it. But there is nothing wrong with, “You need to listen to me.”

“How dare you!”

SY: This phrase is counterproductive. It’s better to say, “Why do you think this is okay?” The comment should attempt to get them to question their own actions. It’s so much more effective than giving consequences.