



AskBarbara: Setting a Good Example When Those in the Public Eye Aren't

Dear AskBarbara,

Elections are always difficult to explain to children, but I feel that this year's election is *especially* difficult in this area. How do I reconcile the message we teach our children of setting a positive example and not being a bully with what they are seeing in the news every day?

**At a Loss for Words,
Minneapolis**

Dear Loss for Words,

Thank you so much for your very timely and relevant question.

Adults may claim 360-degree vision, but children have amazing hearing when inappropriate things are said. Just this week I was talking to my daughter on the phone. She was upstairs while the children were playing with friends downstairs (it was pretty noisy). In our conversation, my daughter said a swear word and within seconds the kids came running upstairs yelling, "Ima! Ima! We heard you say a swear word!" (She was "busted" and had to admit that she said the wrong thing.) So even if you are keeping the news off around your children, people are talking about the election and other events everywhere. Our children are listening and taking it all in.

Elections have always been contentious, often with mudslinging on all sides. But I agree with you that this year's seems to have reached a new low of inappropriate behavior.

Unfortunately, what I'm seeing is that the problem you are concerned about doesn't only apply to the election. *The Washington Post* recently reported that a number of rock stars and athletes were shutting down their Twitter and Instagram accounts because of the overwhelming number of hurtful and insulting negative comments that were being posted. And it's not only politicians who are telling lies. This past week we watched a gold medal role model and his teammates lie. In addition, we heard scripted and insincere apologies.

It seems like we are losing our way when it comes to honesty, kindness, humility, respect, common decency and generally appropriate behavior. I wish we could make it stop. Many adults in the public eye are not setting good examples for children!

The ugly truth is that as we get closer to the election, the situation will probably escalate. As a parent, saying nothing or making excuses for the inappropriate behavior of others will probably be understood by your children as condoning actions that you actually believe are wrong. Here are some suggestions for what you can do:

- 1) Be a good role model for your children. Your behavior sets a powerful example. Your kids are watching you and learning from you all of the time. Living your values and following your own rules teaches your children how to “walk the walk.” Actions do speak louder than words.**
- 2) Use the inappropriate behavior that you are seeing in others as golden teachable moments. This is a perfect opportunity to share and re-enforce your family’s values and rules. For example: “In our family, we don’t say disrespectful, negative things about others.”**
- 3) Explain why behaviors are inappropriate using simple, age-appropriate language and examples. A 4-year-old can understand that lying is never OK. Explain it this way, “The truth is the way something REALLY is and not the way you WISH it was. So when I ask you what happened, tell me the way it really happened and not the way you wish it happened.”**
- 4) State clearly what behaviors are acceptable to you and what your family rules are. Make sure everyone understands. Re-enforce desired behavior with hugs, smiles and praise.**
- 5) Have reasonable consequences for inappropriate behavior and be consistent. For example, “What you said hurt your sister’s feelings. Please look at her and say, ‘I’m sorry and I won’t say that again.’”**

And remember, children’s (selective) hearing and memory is so acute that it could probably compete with elephants. I hope this is helpful. If you would like more information, email me at AskBarbara@jfcsmpls.org.

**All the best,
Barbara**