

**May, 2000**  
**A Lesson in Tactfulness**  
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Baby-sitting for the S\*\*\*\*\* family has been a very important part of my life. For almost ten years, I have been watching their three girls: S\*\* who is now 10, and M\*\*\* and K\*\*\*\*\* who are seven. My relationship with the family has grown into something special with their girls becoming like sisters to me, and their parents becoming like supporting friends. Although it hasn't always been fun or easy, the experience has taught me much about children, fairness, and most importantly patience.

The lessons I have learned from baby-sitting for the girls have been vast, from learning how to change diapers to how incapable I am of explaining the birds and the bees to inquiring girls. There was one difficult lesson, however, whose payoff was long in coming.

Like summers before, I spent last summer baby-sitting. The twins had just finished senior kindergarten and were eager to run free in the summer sun. I soon realized their mouths were also eager to run free. Within the first week of vacation, M\*\*\* and K\*\*\*\*\* began using words I had never heard from their sweet and innocent mouths. Some words were more vulgar than others, and some were just rude. Initially, I couldn't understand where they heard these words and why they found such pleasure in speaking rudely. Most importantly, I didn't know what to do about it.

When I first heard them use an inappropriate word I was shocked. They were sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me to finish making their lunches. I heard M\*\*\* call K\*\*\*\*\* a "penis pants." At first I was surprised and actually chuckled under my breath, until I realized that was just the beginning. K\*\*\*\*\* countered with, "no I'm not, you're the penis." They were hysterical at this point and I remained calm as I asked M\*\*\* to join me in the living room. She reluctantly followed. I sat with her on the couch and tried to explain, without laughing, that there are appropriate and inappropriate times to use that word. I further explained that she should never make fun of anyone by calling them that. I soon discovered that my efforts failed, for later that day she returned to calling her sisters bad names.

I had another problem. The twins soon began calling everything and everyone they saw fat. If they saw an overweight person in public they would say, "Look how fat she is. She is so fat!" This time I used the advice my mom gave me years earlier. I told them that if they didn't have anything nice to say, then they shouldn't say anything at all. I tried to tell them to think of something nice to say about someone instead.

Weeks passed and the name calling continued. I realized that, to a degree, kids often call their siblings or other kids names. I didn't think, though, that it was right that they embarrassed S\*\*'s friend by calling her fat or that they called each other inappropriate names in public. Gradually, I came to suspect that the

girls were looking for a reaction in calling others names, that is, their name calling was being positively reinforced by making others laugh. To remedy this I had been yelling at them to stop. I would yell for minutes at a time about how bad it was that they were speaking like that. This attention may have only provided additional reinforcement.

Given this analysis, I decided instead to use extinction. I completely ignored any time the girls said a bad word. Although I could not control how others reacted towards them, I discontinued attending to them. Soon, at least around me, the name calling decreased. I can't say that it was only due to my using extinction, but it was encouraging to see that the bad language decreased.

I found the problem of calling people "fat" a more important issue. The girls were apparently doing this because others laughed at their taunts. In this case I wanted not only to decrease their ridiculing others with "fat," but increase their complimenting others. So, I decided to use a constructional approach in which I would focus on increasing the adaptive behavior of complimenting others, rather than directly decreasing the inappropriate behavior of calling people "fat."

I realized that for them to start complimenting others they would have to learn new behavior. I had heard them say nice things to each other before, so I knew that they were capable. I thought that I could increase their rate of complimenting others by modeling this behavior. I began saying something nice about each of them more than once daily. I also tried directly prompting them to compliment each other. For example, while coloring, I'd have each girl say something nice about the other's pictures.

Once they started complimenting each other and others more often, I reinforced this behavior. Each time one of the girls said something nice to another, I verbally praised her. This appeared to increase their rate of complimenting.

All of this came together perfectly one summer day as we were exiting a grocery-store parking lot. The twins were sitting in the back of the car and things seemed more quiet than usual; there was neither talking nor fighting. As I waited for traffic to pass I turned around to see them watching an extremely overweight woman walking towards us on the sidewalk. I realized the windows were down and began to panic, thinking of all the horrible things they were going to say to this woman as she approached the car. I prayed for the traffic to pass before she got too close. Just as she reached the car, M\*\*\* said so sincerely, "nice shoes." At that moment I realized that that my complimenting and reinforcing had finally paid off.

