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COACHING

Don’t Say This. Say This Instead.

12 ways to communicate with your adult children with greater respect and connection

When love sounds like control, criticism, or guilt, our words can create distance—even when our intentions are good. These alternatives invite curiosity, respect, and healthier connection.

01 When offering unsolicited advice

DON’T SAY “You need to listen to me. I've been around a lot longer than you have.”

SAY THIS INSTEAD “I have some thoughts if you'd like to hear them. But I trust you to make the decision that's right for you.”

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR You don't trust me to make my own decisions.

REMEMBER Ask permission before offering advice.

02 When your adult child doesn’t call or visit

DON’T SAY “You never call me anymore. I guess I'm just not important to you.”

SAY THIS INSTEAD “I miss spending time with you. I'd love to catch up sometime this week if you're available.”

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR I'm responsible for your happiness, and I've disappointed you.

REMEMBER Express your desire for connection without assigning guilt.

03 When they make a decision you disagree with

DON’T SAY “I just don't understand why you would do something like that.”

SAY THIS INSTEAD “That's different from what I would have chosen. I'd be interested in understanding what led you to that decision.”

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR I disapprove of you and your choices.

REMEMBER Curiosity creates more room for connection than criticism.

04 When they tell you that you’ve hurt them

DON’T SAY “You're too sensitive. That's not what I meant.”

SAY THIS INSTEAD “I didn't realize my words affected you that way. Would you help me understand what felt hurtful?”

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR Your feelings aren't valid, and I'm not interested in understanding them.

REMEMBER Understanding someone's experience doesn't require agreeing with every interpretation.

05 When they bring up something from childhood

DON’T SAY “I did the best I could. You had a wonderful childhood.”

SAY THIS INSTEAD “I remember some things differently, but I want to understand how you experienced them.”

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR There's no room for your experience if it differs from mine.

REMEMBER Two people can remember the same event differently without one intentionally lying.

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06 When they establish a boundary

DON'T SAY "After everything I've done for you, this is how you treat me?"

SAY THIS INSTEAD "I may need some time to adjust, but I want to understand and respect what you're asking."

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR You owe me access to your life because I raised you.

REMEMBER Parenting is a relationship of love, not a debt an adult child must repay.

07 When they prioritize their spouse or their own family

DON'T SAY "Ever since you got married, you've forgotten about your family."

SAY THIS INSTEAD "I know you have a lot of responsibilities now. I'd love for us to find ways to stay connected that work for everyone."

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR I'm expected to choose between my spouse and my parents.

REMEMBER Healthy family relationships adapt as adult children establish their own households.

08 When they don't follow your advice

DON'T SAY "Well, don't come crying to me when it doesn't work out."

SAY THIS INSTEAD "I hope things work out well. And if they don't, I'm still here to listen."

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR Your love and support depend on whether I follow your advice.

REMEMBER Support should not be conditional on obedience.

09 When they express a different belief or value

DON'T SAY "I didn't raise you to think that way."

SAY THIS INSTEAD "We see this differently, but I love you and value our relationship. I'd like to understand your perspective."

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR You can only belong in this family if you believe what I believe.

REMEMBER Differentiation allows people to remain connected without requiring agreement.

10 When you feel excluded from family activities

DON'T SAY "I guess you don't want me in your life anymore."

SAY THIS INSTEAD "I'd really enjoy spending some time together soon. Would you be interested in planning something?"

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR I have to manage your feelings whenever I make plans without you.

REMEMBER Make a direct request rather than interpreting exclusion as rejection.

11 When they ask for space

DON'T SAY "Fine. If you don't want me around, I won't bother you again."

SAY THIS INSTEAD "I hear that you need space. I'll respect that. I care about you, and I'm open to talking when you're ready."

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR If I establish a boundary, you'll punish me or withdraw your love.

REMEMBER Respect requested space without retaliation or repeated attempts to override it.

12 When they say they want less or no contact

DON'T SAY "You're breaking this family apart. One day you'll regret what you're doing."

SAY THIS INSTEAD "I'm saddened by the distance between us. I respect your decision, and I'll use this time to reflect on my part in our relationship."

WHAT THEY MIGHT HEAR You're responsible for everyone's pain, and I want you to feel guilty enough to come back.

REMEMBER Acknowledge the loss without using guilt to force reconnection.

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