



Ask the Doctor - Answers to your Parenting Questions

How to handle four year old who says "I won't be your friend"?

Dear Dr. Markham,

I have a 4.5 year old attachment-parented daughter who sometimes, when frustrated, will tell her friends "you're not my friend" or "I hate you." I don't care for this kind of talk, but feel that it's fairly normal behavior for a four year old. What makes matters worse is a close friend who is absolutely appalled by these phrases and tells my daughter and me that she won't have any friends if she talks to them like that, and always asks me "where did she learn that?!" Is my daughter's behavior normal? What should I do when she says these things? How should I handle my judgmental friend?

-- Allison

Dear Allison,

Any preschool teacher will tell you that your daughter's behavior is completely normal for a four year old. Preschool and kindergarten kids use "You're not my friend" as code for everything from "I'm tired of playing with you now" to "I want my way!" These threats are standard preschool power plays, along with "If you don't do what I want, then you can't come to my birthday party!"

However, there is a lot you can and should do to discourage this kind of behavior, especially because your daughter is doing more than expressing anger, she is using the threat of complete disengagement. Kids are by nature forgiving, but her threats may indeed drive other kids away, and this is a perfect age for your daughter to learn more appropriate negotiating skills before she pulls out the nuclear option. It's our job as parents to teach these skills. How?

1. Don't use discipline strategies that make use of threats, power plays (punishment of any sort), or social exclusion (timeouts), because you don't want to model those things. Instead, set appropriate limits, enforced with empathy. Kids whose parents use empathy as their primary parenting tool are receiving constant training in empathy and are much less likely to be mean to others.
2. Make sure your daughter gets plenty of opportunities to make her own choices and feel powerful in her life. Much like a toddler reveling in the power of "no," preschoolers abuse social exclusion more if that's the only time they get to feel powerful.
3. Sensitize your daughter to other people's experience by constantly commenting on how others feel so she sees things from other people's viewpoints. ("Look, that boy is crying. I wonder why?" or "Jenna seemed so happy when you hugged her.") It's crucial that children develop this skill, not

just so that they're nice people (although we all want that for our kids) but because reading the social cues of others is the only way to function in a complicated social world.

4. Have a discussion with your daughter when she isn't angry about how she thinks it makes her friends feel to hear these comments. Agree with her that when we're mad it's hard not to say angry things. Tell her that you know she is mad when she says these things, and it must seem to her that they are true at the time. Ask her if, in retrospect, she actually meant them. Ask her how else she might have handled that situation.

5. If your daughter tells you about one of these incidents after the fact, let her blow off steam by talking about it, while you reflect what she's saying so she feels heard and understood. If your daughter insists that she meant what she said, don't make the mistake of validating her anger. Anger is always a response to underlying hurt, fear or sadness. Look for those underlying feelings, validate them, and help your daughter acknowledge them: *"Sounds like you were hurt when Cassie wanted to let the other kids join your game, because you wanted to play with just the two of you...You were sad inside....You felt hurt, so you wanted to hurt Cassie back. So you said angry things to her."*

6. Help your daughter find words that actually express her real feelings, that she could say next time, like *"Cassie, I love playing our game with just US right now. I like the other kids too, but maybe we can play with them later?"*

7. Help your daughter to reinterpret other kids' behavior when she is over-reacting. *"Cassie likes you a lot. She also likes to play with the other kids with you because that's fun too. She always likes you, whether or not other kids are around."*

8. Talk to your daughter before her play dates about what might happen, and how she could respond if she gets hurt, sad, or angry. Let her know that all her feelings are fine and can be expressed directly, but that she has a responsibility to be considerate of others. Help her to experiment with saying what she needs more directly, such as *"I'm sorry, I don't feel like sharing right now, Can I give this to you when I'm done?"* or *"I'm scared about climbing high like you do."*

9. Teach your daughter skills to manage her anger and frustration. Can she carry a squeeze ball in her pocket to squeeze? Learn to close her eyes, breathe, and count to ten? Say *"I am really mad and I don't want to say anything mean so I am going to get a drink of water and calm down."*

10. Teach your daughter to negotiate disagreements with her friends. Introduce the problem-solving concept of *"We can find a solution that works for everyone."* For instance, *"Tiffany wants to play dress-up. Jade wants to play dolls. What could you both enjoy doing?"* They may decide to play house, which could involve both dress-up and dolls. Or they may go outside to the swings. Either way, no one loses.

11. If you overhear a mean remark, intervene immediately. While kids learn a lot by "working things out for themselves," they also often need parental teaching during a conflict. In a very calm, warm voice, say something like *"Wow. That's a very angry thing to say. It sounds like you are so angry at Cassie you want to hurt her. When you get angry like that, I know you must be sad or hurt inside. I'd like to hear what's upsetting you."* Then you look at the friend and say *"I know it hurts to have my daughter speak so angrily to you. I'm so sorry." Then sit down with the girls, preferably with an arm around each of them and say "I wonder if you both could tell me what's happening? Maybe I can help."*

At this point, having had their anger and hurt acknowledged, they will hopefully be a little calmer. Listen respectfully as each of them tells her side of the story, and reflect her point of view: *"So you wanted to play the game with the rules on the box."* (Turning to the other girl) *"And you wanted to play the game they way you learned it at preschool."* This allows each child to feel heard, and to understand the other child's perspective. It is particularly important to acknowledge the hurtfulness of the mean comments if the playmate is to let go of her anger and participate in problem-solving.

Then acknowledge that it's a difficult problem: *"Wow. This is a big challenge. The same game, but two different sets of rules. And each girl wants to do it the way she's used to. That IS hard to work out. Any ideas about what you could do?"*

As they chime in about possible solutions, acknowledge each girl's suggestions by repeating them, without judgment. *"Cassie thinks you should just make one change in the rules. But Jade doesn't want to change the rules and just wants to play a different game. Hmmm. I wonder how you two can find a solution that works for everyone?"* This last sentence puts the responsibility to find a win/win solution on them.

Don't issue an edict on what they should do, both because one of them will resent it and because you rob them of the opportunity to learn they can reach a negotiated settlement. After awhile, if they can't seem to come up with a solution and you can do it subtly, you can ask a question like *"What would happen if you played the game Cassie's way for awhile and then played the game your way for awhile?"*

You'll find that if you do this with your daughter a few different times you'll eventually be able to say *"I have confidence you two can find a solution that works for both of you so you can start playing again. I can't wait to hear what it is!"* You'll be able to actually go do the dishes or something (but stay within earshot.)

Once they announce a solution, say in a celebratory tone, *"You two are such great problem-solvers – you came up with a solution that works for both of you! What good friends you are! No more icky feelings? Why don't you two hug and make up, so you have time to play more?"*

Usually there is no need to make anyone apologize, because both kids participated in the fight, and making someone apologize makes them wrong and defensive. Luckily, kids do seem to get over these hurtful comments quickly if you help them find a solution to the disagreement that triggered it in the first place. Of course, if the other child still seems angry or hurt, you can say to your daughter *"Cassie still feels sad because of what you said to her. Can you tell her how much you want to be her friend and play together now?"* Usually your daughter will be more than happy to oblige now that the conflict is behind her.

12. You might want to read John Gottman's **Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child**. I am betting that your daughter has a head start of this because she's been attachment-parented, but every parent can benefit from the real life examples he uses to show parents how to "coach" their kids to develop emotional intelligence (and his research is eye-opening). Teaching kids to understand and manage their feelings, and to communicate well with others, is even more important than the academic learning they do in school, and we parents don't get nearly enough help with this tough job.

Finally, how should you handle your judgmental friend?

I would start by agreeing with her that this kind of comment is hurtful and it

bothers you to have your daughter be hurtful to others. If you can do it humorously and without being defensive, you might add that you've been told it's normal behavior for kids this age and hopefully doesn't portend that your daughter will be an axe murderer or pariah. As much as you love her and appreciate her concern for your daughter, you'd actually prefer that she not make a big deal with your daughter about it, so your daughter doesn't feel a need to defend her position by getting stuck on it.

To reassure your friend, you might then launch into a description of all the things you are doing to discourage the behavior – your own 12-Step program! If she seems unconvinced, you might ask her what she recommends that you do about it?

Many moms do tell their kids that mean language like this is on a par with name calling and is simply not permissible, punishable by a timeout. Even if I believed in timeouts (which I don't), I personally would not go that far, because any time you draw a line your child can't cross you need a consequence for when they inevitably cross it, and kids are more likely to do what we want them to do if we keep threats and punishment from jeopardizing the relationship (which is of course what you're trying to teach your daughter!)

Besides, it seems clear that teaching kids not to use the power of social exclusion against each other by threatening them with social exclusion in the form of a timeout is as likely to backfire as teaching them not to hit by hitting them. Good luck!

0 comments



Leave a message...

Newest ▾

Community

Share



No one has commented yet.

ALSO ON AHA! PARENTING

What's this?

Honesty, Anger and Parenting

3 comments • 25 days ago



Kate K — Wow wow wow. I am an adult child and I wish I could show my mother this ...

What To Say Instead of Punishing To Teach a Lesson

3 comments • a month ago



DrLauraMarkham — Sarah- A three year old is not "bad". He is showing you he needs ...

Balancing Self Care with Child Care

1 comment • 24 days ago



Melanie Taylor, M.Ed — Now that I've retired from district teaching, I am ...

When young children lie or are drama queens

2 comments • a month ago



DrLauraMarkham — Jennifer, If you are punishing your daughter you can expect ...



Comment feed



Subscribe via email

[View Older Comments](#)