

Language Pattern to Defuse Potential Conflict Situations

You're sitting at the table trying to enjoy a family meal. Two siblings are bating each other by making snide comments to one another. You can see a big fall out looming. How do you stop it?

It is not uncommon for one child to simply decide that he/she is going to pick on a sibling however, it is far more likely that what looks like an act of random spite is underpinned by an event that you know nothing about that occurred upstairs in the bedroom, at school or wherever. It is important to bear this in mind when tackling sibling unpleasantness. Also, we are not mind readers (although we often act as though we are!) and have no idea what the apparently aggressing child has in mind. Sadly, we have become a society where what was clearly seen as unkind is now accepted as 'banter'. Your child may not be aware that they are being really, unkind and may feel that they are being funny.

SO.....

1. Be clear that what is going on looks and feels unkind
2. Be specific about the behaviour you feel needs to stop
3. Do not get drawn into any discussion about what was intended, who started it etc, etc
4. Counter any excuses with the Maybe, And, language pattern set out below

Mary and John have been playfully bating one another since arriving home from school and now, whilst at the table for a meal, things have begun to escalate.

Jane – "You're such a saddo you can't even get a girlfriend; none of the girls in our year fancy you."

John – "I wouldn't go out with them anyway." John looks down embarrassed.

Parent – "That kind of talk sounds and feels spiteful and is not ok. That needs to stop."

Jane – "Well I was only joking – he does it to me and you never say anything to him. Oh no because he's the golden boy!"

Most often the adult response to this type of child's response is either to placate "Oh, darling, of course John isn't the favourite etc etc"; or to get cross, "You know perfectly well what you were doing, you're such a spiteful girl when you want to be, and John doesn't deserve it!"

Everything that Jane has said following 'well I was only joking' is designed to place you on the back foot, it is what we call a secondary behaviour. Secondary behaviours are designed to take attention away from the primary behaviour, which in this example, is being spiteful to John. If we respond to secondary behaviours then we are buying in to the excuse and validating it as reasonable and ok. In the example above, the secondary behaviour of claiming to be loved less as John is the 'Golden Boy', is designed to make doubt your judgement of Jane's behaviour, place Jane as the victim here, and prevent you from imposing any kind of consequence – even if it is only a verbal telling off.

The response you need to use is a **partial agreement**:

Parent – "You *may* have been joking **and** (not but!) now you need to stop, speak kindly and eat your meal, now thank you".

You then take your attention away by speaking to someone at the table, looking down at your meal or whatever other activity works in the situation. By doing this, Jane has been corrected. She knows that you know she was being spiteful, but it hasn't worked, and you have stopped the situation from escalating. By taking your attention away from Jane (rather than making eye contact and glaring at her!) you are allowing Jane essential 'take up time' during which she can process what you have said. You are also not putting Jane in a position where, to 'save face', she needs to become rude. We should never set children up to fail.