



## Express Your Feelings So Children Listen *I*-Messages

When you have a problem with a child, it helps to talk about it. Maybe your child is ignoring your rights, being disrespectful, or doing something that worries you.

When parents want children to change their behavior, they often use *you*-messages, such as: “*You* should know better,” or “*You* need to stop that.” Children who hear a lot of *you*-messages get discouraged. They may fight back or stop listening. *You*-messages can lower self-worth and reduce cooperation.

*I*-messages, which explain how you feel, work better. Children may not understand how their behavior affects you unless you tell them. *You*-messages focus on the child. *I*-messages focus on the parent.

The form of an *I*-message is:

When you \_\_\_\_\_,  
[describe the child’s behavior without judging it]

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_.  
[name of an emotion] [optional: describe effect on you]

Examples:

When you say you hate me, I feel hurt.

When you run with scissors in your hand, I feel scared because I think you might get hurt.

When you take all the candy, I feel upset because the other kids won’t have any.

*I*-messages help children understand what their actions mean to you. They hear a way of talking about problems without blame. And they learn to share feelings in a way that can help solve problems. An *I*-message shows respect for yourself and for your child.

It’s important to keep angry feelings out of an *I*-message. If you show anger, children may feel they are being blamed. To move away from anger, try to give the message before you feel angry. For example, you might start out by feeling worried or disappointed. Try talking to your child then.

When you are really angry, take some time away from the child until you cool down, or ask someone else to handle the problem.

[www.PeaceAtHomeParenting.com](http://www.PeaceAtHomeParenting.com)

[info@peaceathomeparenting.com](mailto:info@peaceathomeparenting.com) • 1-661-PARENT-6

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