



Life Actually By Kari Kampakis

Social filters: Think it or say it?

It’s a really exciting day when your child begins to speak.

If you’re like me, you tried to catch it on videotape. You may have asked them to repeat the beautiful word you just heard. “Ma-ma. Da-da. Bye-bye. Ba-ba.”

As your child’s vocabulary expanded, the excitement continued. Before you knew it, they could form a little phrase. They could express themselves verbally. They could articulate an observation that made you wonder if you had a prodigy on your hands.

And then day, the unthinkable happened. Your prodigy made a comment that was rude, mean or hurtful. Maybe they called a pregnant lady fat or told a waiter he had a funny face. With red cheeks and a pit in your stomach, you tried to salvage the situation. You realized the urgent need to teach your child something imperative.

A social filter.

It isn’t easily done, because the truth is that even adults lack social filters. Even adults make hurtful comments that stop the conversation. We blurt out things we shouldn’t. We say things we regret. We share an observation — and then realize we’ve offended someone by seeing the

reaction on their face.

The good news is there is a motto that can help everyone (children and adults) choose words more wisely. I learned it years ago when my second-grader’s substitute teacher, Bethany McCandless, used it during a morning meeting that parents could observe.

Mrs. McCandless’s lesson, adapted from the school’s speech and language pathologist, centered on the importance of words. With her class circled around her, she read two books: “My Mouth is a Volcano” and “Being Frank.” Using humor, these books teach kids how to control their tongue, be kind with their words, and think before they speak.

Mrs. McCandless also introduced a fun game called “Think It or Say It?” The kids laughed and cackled as she threw out statements a second-grader might make and then asked for opinions on whether those statements were appropriate.

“I like your shirt.” Think it or say it?  
“You smell gross.” Think it or say it?  
“Your ears are big.” Think it or say it?  
“You’re a fast runner.” Think it or say it?  
“How much money do your parents make?” Think it or say it?

This simple exercise got the point across. The class eagerly participated and answered every question correctly. Even my youngest daughter, Camille — age 4 at the time and observing the meeting with me — found this game hilarious. Our family has played “Think It or Say It?” ever since, using it as a reminder that not every thought needs to be voiced.

It saddens me how our world today has low standards for speech. People are snarky, harsh and blunt. They speak recklessly and carelessly, giving little thought to impact or tone.

But words really are powerful. Words can build people up or tear people down. They can make people smile or reduce them to tears. And while we may not remember what we say, people do remember what comes out of our mouth — especially when a comment stings.

This is why it’s crucial to teach a social filter early. While some adults are way too stubborn to change their habits of speech, children can be trained. Children aren’t set in their ways, and when they do speak out of line, it can lead to teachable moments about impulse control and choosing the right words.

There’s a time to state an opinion and a time to bite your tongue. There’s a way to speak the truth with gentleness and grace. And if you have a child at home — especially one articulating their thoughts — I encourage you to try the “Think It or Say It?” game. It won’t take long for them to catch on and have fun applying the phrase.

Our world would be much kinder if social filters were more common. If we all made it a priority, we could easily turn the tide. Kids need constant reminders that what they say matters, and so do adults. As we share this lesson with them, we should take it to heart ourselves, setting an example we’d like them to follow through the words we purposefully choose.

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