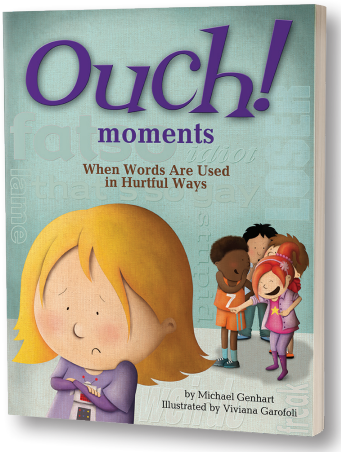
AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Ouch! Moments: Strategies to Help Your Child Understand Microaggressions



You may have heard the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." But the fact is, words can hurt. Young people have a wonderful capacity to care about each other. However, they need guidance, mentoring, and modeling to understand the impact of their words and behaviors.

Magination Press book, *Ouch! Moments: When Words Are Used in Hurtful Ways* by Michael Genhart, PhD, illustrated by Viviana Garofoli, helps to increase awareness in children about what "ouch moments" are, how and where they occur, and what kids can do about them. This excerpt from the book's Note to Parents and Caregivers, by Kevin L. Nadal, PhD, provides information about microaggressions and strategies for parents to help their children understand them.

What Are Microaggressions?

Microaggressions, or "ouch moments" are brief exchanges where an indignity, insult, or slight is expressed—whether intentionally or not—from one person to another (especially towards members of minority or oppressed groups).

- **Microaggressions are often subtle.** The children expressing them may not even realize that they are being biased or offensive. For example, when a child is left out of a playgroup or friendship circle because they are different, that child may be ridiculed directly, or the exclusion may be more subtle. When the exclusion is more subtle, it can be difficult to prove that it is based on one of the child's identities (such as race, social class, or ability status). The child excluded can often feel marginalized, isolated, and rejected without understanding why.
- **Certain words or phrases that some people might view as harmless can also be microaggressions.** For instance, when children use words like "lame" or "gay" to mean that something is bad, weird, or different, they communicate a message that having a disability or being part of the LGBTQ community is equal to being bad, weird, or different. These children are likely not trying to be hurtful toward these groups, they may just be repeating words they have heard and may not realize the discriminatory

connotations. However, for children with disabilities or those who are questioning their sexual orientation, or children with LGBTQ parents, hearing words like these can be quite hurtful and may teach them to internalize negative messages about their identities.

- **Many microaggressions are based on gender.** Most girls and boys are taught the importance of conforming to certain gender roles such as boys aren't supposed to cry or girls are supposed to be demure. Because these gender roles are so pervasive in our society, women and men tend to internalize these norms well into their adult lives.

What Parents and Caregivers Can Do

Research on microaggressions between adults shows that these "ouch moments" often result in problems like depression and low self-esteem. Talking about these instances with your child is one way that you can promote your child's psychological health and wellbeing and help her or him avoid internalizing hurtful messages.

- **When your child is the target of a microaggression**

  One of the biggest issues in addressing experiences in which your child is the target of microaggressions is that you may not be there to witness such instances. As children might not necessarily share these "ouch moments" openly, you can **ask open-ended questions** like "Tell me about someone who did something nice to you today," followed by "Tell me about someone who did something not-so-nice to you today." Or when your child talks about a new friend, ask them something like, "Tell me one way you and your new friend are similar and one way you are different."

  Because these moments might be embarrassing, shameful, and hurtful, you child may want to forget them altogether; however, it is important for children to talk about these experiences so they don't internalize any hurtful messages. **Foster open dialogue with your child** so they can share these hurtful moments with you.

  Validate your child's experience and feelings if you witness a microaggression or are told about an incident. Reassure your child that the incident sounded very hurtful and that it is not their fault. Depending on your child's age level and comprehension, you might want to teach your child about unfairness in the world and that some people treat each other badly because of their differences. Assure your child that she or he is special and that all of your child's identities and traits make her or him a unique and phenomenal human being.

- **When your child is the enactor of a microaggression**

  It can be very difficult to see your child being hurtful towards others, particularly if it is based on some sort of bias or difference. If you see or learn that your child is engaging in this sort of behavior, it is important to address the incident directly, so that your child knows the meaning behind her or his words or behavior.

  Instead of scolding or punishing right away, **ask your child why she or he engaged in this behavior**. They may not even realize what they did was hurtful, and may have even learned the behavior from some other child or adult in his or her life. Children will sometimes mimic words they hear somewhere else, and may not know that they are hurting someone else's feelings. In these cases, teach your child about why these

words might be upsetting to someone else, and **help her or him empathize with how the other person might feel.** For example, if your child makes fun of a child with a disability, ask your child to imagine what it might be like to have a disability. Ask your child to picture how others might treat her or him, as well as some of the obstacles she or he may experience.

Be a role model. If your child sees that you are someone who is fair and equal and does not discriminate against others, she or he will recognize that as normalized behavior. If your child sees that you are comfortable with and embrace differences, she or he will celebrate diversity, too. If your child sees that you stand up against "ouch moments" and are caring and compassionate towards others, then your child will do her or his best, too.

This is an excerpt from the Note to Parents and Caregivers by Kevin L. Nadal, PhD, in Magination Press book, *Ouch! Moments: When Words Are Used in Hurtful Ways* by Michael Genhart, PhD.

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