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My 3-year-old teenager

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By [howard ludwig](#)

The Wife is in charge of the nighttime routine. She bathes our two sons, changes them into pajamas, reads bedtime stories and tucks them under their covers.

This works well for me, too. The Wife misses Bubba and Pete while at work, whereas I need a break after dinner. I'd rather clean dishes than deal with my little maniacs for even one more minute. So, the system works well.

Except when it doesn't work at all.

My 3- and 4-year-old sons have all day to test my boundaries and limitations. (This is largely why I'm exhausted by 7 p.m.) But these two stinkers have a small window at the end of the day to test their mother.

They make it count. Splashing water all over the bathroom is a regular part of the test. They'll also refuse to brush their teeth and turn storytime into Wrestlemania. One evening, The Wife had enough of our youngest son. Peter was sent to bed without reading a book.

"I love you, Peter," she said after placing our ornery son into his crib.

"Well, I don't love you!" he yelled as she walked out of the room.

I could tell The Wife was hurt by the exchange. Here she leaves for work before sunrise to pay for our house, food, school tuition and everything else. In return, she comes home and gets a verbal punch in the gut at the end of the day.

Looking for answers, I turned to **Erin Mason, a DePaul University professor**. Mason worked as school counselor for children from kindergarten through eighth grade for 13 years before joining DePaul's School of Education.

"I don't know if it is so important to pay attention to the content of that message," Mason said of Peter's angry outburst.

She cited Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development. Eight stages exist within this well-supported theory. The outcomes of each stage are said to determine personality. Peter is currently in third stage: "Initiative versus Guilt."

This stage commonly occurs from ages 3 to 6. It's a time when children attempt to assert themselves. They make up games, do things like dress themselves and attempt to lead others. If these efforts are squelched through criticism or control, children develop a sense of guilt. They may even feel like a nuisance to others.

Peter wasn't intentionally being hurtful with his comment. Rather, he was simply frustrated and lashed out. Within these types of rebellious outbursts is a child searching for his or her identity within the family, Mason said.

"This is why a 3-year-old is a lot like a teenager," she said, noting the similarly disagreeable attitudes.

Mason also correctly speculated that Peter's outbursts are likely louder and more frequent than that of his older brother. She suggested Peter is taking temper tantrums to a new level in an attempt to distance himself from Bubba.

It's helpful to know Peter is going through a rebellious stage. But that doesn't let him off the hook for talking to his mother like Eric Cartman. Mason suggested waiting for the situation to cool before addressing the evening's events.

Children of Peter's age often lash out because they don't have the vocabulary to say what's on their minds. To arm them with this vocabulary, parents should talk about feelings, specifically feeling sad, mad or happy, Mason said.

Peter should know what he said made his mom sad. It can also be suggested that the reason for his outburst was because he was mad or angry. Using visual aids such as frowning, crying or smiley faces can help further translate feelings into words, she said.

I started applying these tips last week. When I saw Peter was happy, mad or sad, I'd try to point it out. It seemed to help. The strongest evidence came as we were preparing to leave the house one day. Pete wanted to finish playing with his toy barbecue grill, but there wasn't time.

As I hurried him along, he threw himself as well as the pieces of his wooden shish kebab on the floor.

"I'm so angry!" he yelled, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists.

At least, it's a step up from, "I don't love you!"

Howard A. Ludwig is a former SouthtownStar business writer who traded his reporters notebook for a diaper bag, becoming a stay-at-home dad.