

To change a child's life, speak 5 words

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First published in *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

Friday, February 25, 2005

It all began when I entered ninth grade. The counselor looked at my good grades and asked where I was going to college. College? No one had ever asked that question. I had no money. Besides, I had holes in my socks.

That day, I took on a new goal. If my counselor thought I was going to college. . . . If she thought . . . , then maybe I could. Maybe I would.

As a parent, children's author and education consultant, I need to pass on what my counselor taught me. I have shared what I know with thousands of educators and parents around the country. But there are thousands, millions of you out there whom I expect I will never meet. So could you just give me a moment.

Like my counselor, you can make a difference. Yes, you. And all you need to do is say five words to every child within earshot. And say them often.

I'll tell you what those words are and how and when you might say them. And then, if you're not already convinced, I'll tell you why it's important that you do this.

The five words you need to say to kids are "When you go to college . . ." Now those five words can preface any number of other words. You're making conversation here, folks. And obviously, this purposeful conversation takes on a slightly different look with different kids.

If you don't know the child well or the two of you have locked eyes while waiting in a line, you'll say: "When you go to college, I wonder if you'll still have those dimples," or "When you go to college, I bet you'll be really tall," or even "When you go to college, do you think you'll still come here?"

The point is, the words that follow those first five need only fit the situation -- and be positive. Of course, it's good if your sentence sends a praising message. And therein lie two of several.

The words "When you go to college . . ." are powerful because they convey an expectation that the child is headed to college. Now, you're wanting to say here that not every child is college material. And you're right. But every child is learning material. Besides, where is it written that "college" means only the two- or four-year kind? In truth, college may mean any number of post-high-school training programs required for all sorts of jobs.

There's still another powerful message you're sending to child after child. "When you go to college . . ." implies the child will complete high school. And no one has to lecture on that point.

We don't stop having this kind of powerful conversation with children when they reach middle or high school. We only need to change the words to ask, "So, where are you going to college?"

For some time now, I've added another question to ask students: "Hey, can you name three colleges or universities where you might study when you're older?" Kids of all ages love the challenge. They tend to pull in their friends and family members. Indeed, I've happened onto some mighty interesting and thoughtful conversations.

Naming colleges is hard for a youngster who has never been on a campus. We expect children to do well in school and in the community. But how many of them know why? Do they have any idea where they're heading?

Every chance I get, I ask teachers and parents to take students on field trips to campuses. Help the children to walk those dorm halls and see technology-clad lodgings. Invite them to sniff the eat-when-you-like, eat-what-you-like buffet. And then ask them to name colleges they might like to attend.

I often wonder if my high school counselor knew what she was saying to me that day so long ago. Some would say she was doing her job. Me? I know she was doing much more. Her words made a difference. I know it. I know it because here I am telling you.

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