



# Complex Child E-Magazine

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## Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones But Words Will Devastate Me!

by Laura Sussely-Pope

The “R” word. Well, that’s progress. At least we are calling it the “R” word, suggesting the entire word should not be spoken aloud. Retard. Retarded. As in, “I’m so retarded.” “What a retard.” Bantered about without much forethought – by most. It hurts those of us who have children who are, in fact, mentally retarded.

The first time I worried about this word was nine years ago when my son was born and was in the NICU. As I sat, numb, listening to the geneticist explaining his Down syndrome diagnosis, I interrupted and cried, “I just don’t want anyone calling him a retard.”



For those who don’t realize how hurtful it is, we point it out as nicely as we can, and if we are lucky, the offending party apologizes and tries not to do it again. I am not unforgiving. My best friend in the world said it when my little guy was a month old, as she held my son in her arms! And she was truly sorry when I pointed it out. Then, when my baby was four months old and hospitalized with pneumonia, his awesome nurse said

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it as she had trouble getting his blood pressure: "I'm sorry, Jakey, your nurse is retarded today." I said, "Not that there's anything wrong with that," with a smile. She was horrified and apologetic. I would bet she didn't do it again, which was my goal, and she remained Jakey's wonderful nurse.

But what about the many who *do* know better and continue using it? What is their excuse? The use of the word has increased as social media and the internet has grown. One popular site has a quiz that pops up all too often asking, "How Retarded Are You?" Gee, I don't know, but if my nine-year-old son could read, write or talk, I suppose I could ask him. Another application on the site has a quiz allowing members to see "what famous retard" they are most like. Then there is the site, hosted by a police officer in Maryland, titled, "Stop Breaking the Law, Retard." It boasts 100,000 members. Congrats.

I work for a parenting site and not one day passes that I don't see it being used. By mothers! Mothers who may one day themselves have a child with Down syndrome or another condition that may cause their child to be called a retard. I am proud that my employer has seen this word for what it is: hate language.

Its prevalence on the web is astronomical. If you look at the Special Olympics Spread the Word to End the Word site there is a widget [<http://www.rwordcounter.org/>] you can use to see how many times in a day the word is used on any given site. Sadly eye opening. Of course, all you really have to do is Google the word and let the counting begin....

And want to hear it? Over and over and over again? Turn on the TV. I like TV, but if I were to go one week without hearing a character use it, I'd be shocked. The list is endless. While the media may publicize the more blatant and obvious attacks on children like mine (Rush Limbaugh, Rahm Emanuel, Family Guy), that is the tip of the iceberg. Name a sitcom or reality show and there is a good chance it's there, I assure you.

So, as I marvel at how hard my little guy works to do what comes easy for those who casually say, "I'm so retarded!" all I can think to say is, "No, you're not, but my son is." And if and when I hear someone call him a "retard," well, I already feel sorry for them. How nice that ignorant and cruel people can say all those words. My child can barely say "whale" (his favorite animal), and will never be functionally verbal.

Which brings me to the next point. He can't defend himself. Which is what makes this more hateful than even the "N" word, which is, of course, reprehensible.

On the Spread the Word group on Facebook, someone wrote that our kids should simply grow thick skins and defend themselves. Um, what? If my child had the mental capacity and ability to talk, maybe, but what part of *he can't* is that person not understanding? So, sadly, I've come to expect these hurtful and thoughtless statements from strangers, acquaintances, friends and even some family members. I've come to expect the "R" word

being tossed around and defended and downplayed on a regular basis. But when it comes from someone you either love or respect or admire, it cuts like a knife.

Make no mistake about words not being hurtful. Broken bones heal, but there are no splints or casts for spirits.

Take the pledge to Spread the Word to End the Word [<http://www.r-word.org/>] on March 3, 2010.

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