

Words That Build Bridges — Not Walls

A guide for parents who want their child to hear them again

The words we reach for in a difficult moment can either open a door or shut one permanently. This list is not about being perfect. It's about choosing connection over being right.

INSTEAD OF THIS...	SAY THIS ➡
✗ "You're ruining your life."	✓ "I'm worried about the direction these choices are taking you, because I know you're capable of more."
✗ "After everything I've done for you..."	✓ "I love you deeply, and that's why it hurts to watch you struggle like this."
✗ "You never listen."	✓ "I know you may not agree with me right now, but I still want us to be able to talk without attacking each other."
✗ "You're acting selfish."	✓ "Right now your choices are affecting the people around you, and I need you to start thinking about that."
✗ "You've changed so much."	✓ "I miss feeling connected to you, and I'd like us to rebuild that little by little."
✗ "You're lazy."	✓ "I think you've gotten stuck, and I believe you're capable of becoming more independent again."
✗ "You're so disrespectful."	✓ "I want us to speak to each other with respect, even when we're upset."

✗ <i>"You only care about your friends/drugs/partner."</i>	✓ <i>"I feel like I've lost you to something, and that scares me. I'm not going anywhere."</i>
✗ <i>"You always make bad decisions."</i>	✓ <i>"Some of these decisions are hurting you, but that doesn't mean your future is ruined. You have more power than you think."</i>
✗ <i>"You're impossible to help."</i>	✓ <i>"I know you're struggling, but I also know change is possible when you're ready to participate in it. The decision is yours."</i>
✗ <i>"You're just like your father/mother."</i>	✓ <i>"I want you to become your healthiest, strongest self... not repeat painful patterns you see in the adults around you. This is your life."</i>
✗ <i>"You don't appreciate anything."</i>	✓ <i>"I hope one day you understand how much love has been behind everything we do for you. Even those things you don't like."</i>
✗ <i>"What's wrong with you?"</i>	✓ <i>"Something inside you seems overwhelmed, angry, or hurt... and I think that matters. I'm here to talk whenever you're ready."</i>
✗ <i>"You need to grow up."</i>	✓ <i>"Part of becoming an adult is learning to handle responsibilities even when life feels hard."</i>
✗ <i>"I can't take you anymore."</i>	✓ <i>"I'm emotionally exhausted, and I think we both need healthier ways to communicate and move forward. I don't want this to destroy our relationship. You are too important to me."</i>

✗ *"Your brother/sister never does this."*

✓ *"I'm not going to compare you to anyone. You have your own path — I just want you to choose it wisely, because this is your life."*

Remember:
Correct the behavior without attacking the identity.

A child who feels ashamed fights to protect themselves.
A child who feels seen is more likely to reflect.

*The goal is not to win the argument.
The goal is to keep the door open.*