

Embarrassing Your Child – Advice From an Expert

By Patricia Smith Wood

Most parents have experienced some embarrassing moments, thanks to their offspring. The tiny tots have a tendency to throw tantrums and tell family secrets. Sometimes, in their childish innocence, they make comments in front of strangers that can reduce the parent to red-faced, squirming despair. It's just one of life's little moments and you pray for the strength to walk away with some dignity. At such times, your thoughts turn to the hope that someday, they too, will be parents and have their turn. But my child didn't have to wait that long. She had her mother to do the honors. Without deliberate malice or forethought, I began paying her back when she was about eleven. I've had a slight hearing impairment for many years, and I sometimes hear things "funny". So if I hear something that sounds strangely out-of-place, I repeat it to get clarification and it usually gives people a chuckle. When my daughter, Paula, was eleven, she didn't find much humor in the way I heard things. One day we were shopping for school clothes and she was showing me a shirt she found. What she actually said was, "Look, seams inside out!" But I repeated back to her what I thought she said, which came out "Look, a french-fried owl!" Except she claims that I virtually screeched the phrase in a loud, hey-watch-me-embarrass-my-kid, voice. She was, of course, mortified. Skip ahead about 20 years. By this time, she had come to accept my weird way of hearing and enjoyed a good laugh when I came out with a strange version of what was said. So naturally, I had to find another way to embarrass her. However, I must stress that none of this has been deliberate. It's just that I sometimes say things in a way that should have been, shall we say, more carefully phrased.

We were Christmas shopping one Saturday very close to the Holiday. The crowds were huge and we had been going for hours. I was looking for a gag gift for my brother, David. A few weeks before while I was shopping I spied something I thought would be perfect. But I was in a hurry and didn't get it at that time. So on this day, I was trying to remember exactly where it was that I had seen it. We went from store to store without success.

The item I had seen was a duplicate of a thing I had purchased for my husband one vacation. It was a large, plastic ball that had the letters "Rx for Stress" emblazoned on it. It sat on a little stand and you were supposed to pick it up, slap it against the palm of your hand, and it would let out a blood-curdling scream from inside the black plastic ball. It was a great item to have on your desk for guests to amuse themselves with, and I knew my brother would get a kick out of it. But where had I seen it?

Finally, after hours had passed and we had tried the men's gift department in all the stores, all the gift shops, and the luggage and stationery stores, I had one last inspiration. The Broadway had a fabulous collection of similar gifts in their men's department, and I was certain it must be the place.

By this time, it was the dinner hour, and the store was practically deserted. We walked in and there, behind the counter, stood a very handsome African-American man. He smiled and asked if he could help. I sighed, leaned on the counter and said in an

exhausted voice, "I sure hope so. Do you have any of those big, black balls, that when you slap them they scream?"

Paula gasped, the man looked both pained and frightened, and I suddenly realized how what I said hadn't come out exactly right. The universe stopped for an instant. I have to give the salesman a lot of credit. He recovered first and smiled helpfully. He said they did, in fact, have one of the novelty items, though it seemed to be broken. But I didn't care. I decided that I had no choice but to purchase it, broken or not, and I slunk out of the store with the useless thing tucked in my shopping bag. Paula trailed after me and as soon as we were out of the store, she started laughing hysterically.

I ended up giving the thing to my husband, hoping he could fix it. It worked a few times, but couldn't hold up to the slapping. So it now sits on his desk, right alongside the other one he received years before. When people ask why there are two of them, he gleefully tells them the story.

And that's how I got a bad reputation.