

The Weight of Your Words

THE WEIGHT OF YOUR WORDS

*An Islamic Guide to Raising Children Without
Labels That Break Them*

A Darul Hikmah Publication
Rooted in Knowledge. Relevant to Life

Preface

Someone once called you "stubborn." Or "slow."
Or "the difficult one." Maybe they said it once,
in anger, and forgot it by dinner. Maybe they
said it for years, warmly, as if it were simply a
fact about you the way you'd mention
someone's height or their favourite colour.

You didn't forget it.

Decades later, you can probably still hear the
voice that said it. You may have built entire
decisions, which risks you didn't take, which
rooms you stayed quiet in, which version of
yourself you settled for around a sentence
someone else said about you before you were
old enough to check whether it was true.

This book exists because of a simple, uncomfortable observation. Almost every Muslim adult carries at least one of these words, and almost every Muslim parent, often the very same person, is at risk of handing at least one down.

It is written for two readers at once, and it does not ask you to choose which one you are.

If you are a parent, this book is a direct, practical guide to something the fiqh literature treats far more seriously than most parenting advice does: the amānah, the trust, placed in your hands the day your child was born, and specifically what that trust requires of your tongue. Every chapter grounds this in the Qur'an, in authentic hadith, and in how the

Prophet ﷺ actually spoke to the children and companions in his care.

If you are an adult who recognises your own childhood in the pages that follow, this book is not a lecture aimed past you at someone else's parenting. It is, just as much, an explanation of what happened to you, why it settled as deeply as it did, and what tawbah and repair can look like on both sides of that inheritance, whether you are the one who was labelled, the one doing the labelling now, or, as is true for most of us, both.

Nothing here asks you to become a parent who never raises their voice, never runs out of patience, or never makes a mistake. The Sunnah itself did not set that standard, as later chapters will show in detail. It asks something

narrower, and more achievable: that before the next word leaves your mouth about your child, you remember what you are actually holding.

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Chapter 1: The Trust You Didn't Know You Held

A Word You Don't Remember Saying

You have probably said something to your child this week that you don't remember saying.

Maybe it was in the middle of a long day.

Maybe it was in front of guests, when you needed them to behave and they weren't behaving.

Maybe it slipped out in frustration; "you're so stubborn," "why are you always like this," "see your mate." You said it, moved on, and forgot it within the hour.

Your child did not forget it. Children rarely forget the words their parents say about them, especially, the words said repeatedly, or said in front of others, or said with heat. Long after you've forgotten the moment, they are still carrying the sentence.

Picture an ordinary evening. A mother, tired from work, finds her seven-year-old has spilled a bowl of soup across the floor for the second time that week. "Ah, this child! She's always so careless, she'll never be organised in life," she says, already reaching for a cloth, already thinking about what's next for dinner. She has moved on to the next task within seconds. Her daughter has not moved on. She is standing very still, absorbing a sentence that will still be with her at twenty-five, long after her mother has forgotten a Tuesday evening and a bowl of soup.

This book is about that gap. The gap between how lightly we speak to our children and how heavily they receive what we say. Before we get to the specific labels, the fiqh, the practical alternatives, we need to understand *why* this matters as much as it does in Islam. And that starts with a word many of us only associate with money, property, or secrets: **amānah**, trust.

What Amānah Actually Means

Most of us learned the word amānah in a narrow context which is returning a borrowed item, keeping someone's confidence, not touching what isn't yours. That's correct, but it's only a fraction of what the term covers.

Allah describes amānah as something so weighty that the heavens, the earth, and the mountains refused to carry it, and only the human being, despite being, as the verse says, prone to wrong and heedless accepted it (Sūrah al-Aḥzāb, 33:72). This is not describing a wallet someone asked you to hold. It is describing the entire weight of moral responsibility that comes with being human like what you do with your body, your time, your authority, and your tongue.

Allah also commands directly that trusts be given to those they are due (Sūrah an-Nisā, 4:58). Scholars across the madhabs have consistently expanded the scope of amānah beyond property to include *everything placed under a person's care* and this includes a

position of authority, a secret, a responsibility, and the scholars are explicit about this, a child.

A child is not simply "yours." A child is something Allah has placed in your hands, temporarily, for you to protect, shape, and eventually return to Him in the best condition you were capable of. That is not a metaphor. It is the plain meaning of *amānah* applied to parenthood, and it's the frame this entire book is built on.

The Shepherd and the Flock

There is a hadith so widely known that many Muslims can recite part of it without knowing where it comes from. The Prophet ﷺ said that every one of us is a shepherd, and every

one of us is responsible for what is under our care and he specifically named the man as a shepherd over his household, and the woman as a shepherd over her husband's house and children, each of them answerable for that flock (agreed upon, Bukhārī and Muslim).

Read that hadith again, slowly, as a parent. A shepherd does not own the flock. A shepherd is *trusted* with the flock, by someone who will ask for an account of how it was kept. A shepherd who is careless, who lets the flock wander into danger, who feeds it poorly, who leaves it exposed has failed the amānah even if he never intended harm.

This is the lens the coming chapters will keep returning to. When we discuss the words we say to our children, we are not asking "was that

a nice thing to say?" We are asking a heavier question: "did I guard what I was trusted with, or did I let it wander into harm because I wasn't paying attention?"

Why the Tongue Specifically

If amānah covers everything under our care, why does this book focus so narrowly on speech?

Because the tongue is the part of the amānah we guard the least, precisely because it costs us nothing in the moment to misuse it. We would never physically strike a child in front of guests to make a point about their behaviour. Most of us have that boundary firmly in place. But many of us will say something in front of those

same guests that cuts deeper and lasts longer than a smack, and walk away from it without a second thought, because it didn't leave a mark we could see.

The Prophet ﷺ was explicit that the tongue carries this kind of danger. He said that whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should speak good or remain silent (Bukhārī and Muslim). This is a standard, notably, with no exception carved out for speaking to one's own children when frustrated. He also described the believer, in another well-known hadith, as one whose tongue does not taunt, curse, use obscenity, or bring shame (Tirmidhī). These instructions were not given only for how we speak to strangers or enemies. They apply with *more* weight, not less, to the

people we have the most power over and the least accountability with and no one fits that description more than a child in our own home.

This is the uncomfortable truth this chapter is building toward. The same tongue we are commanded to guard around every believer is often the one we guard least around the people Allah entrusted most directly to us.

What This Book Is Not Saying

Before we go further, it's worth being precise about what this book is *not* claiming, because it would be easy to read the coming chapters and feel accused rather than equipped.

This is not a claim that every stern word to a child is sinful, or that correction and discipline have no place in Islamic parenting. They clearly do, and later chapters deal directly with how the Prophet ﷺ corrected children and companions without resorting to the kind of language this book is concerned with nor is this a claim that a parent who has used harsh labels in the past is a failure beyond repair. A full chapter ahead is dedicated specifically to undoing that damage, because tawbah applies here exactly as it applies everywhere else in a Muslim's life.

What this book *is* saying is narrower and, I think, more useful: that many of us are treating our speech to our children as a private, consequence-free space, when in reality it is

one of the clearest expressions of the amānah we were given the day that child was born. Once that is understood, the specific words like "stubborn," "lazy," "useless," "you'll never learn" stop being minor parenting quirks and start looking like exactly what they are: a trust being handled carelessly.

Pause & Reflect

- *What is the amānah of your child's tongue quietly hearing from you this week?*
- *If your child could describe, honestly, what they believe you think of them — what would they say?*

اللَّهُمَّ أَصْلِحْ لِي دِينِي الَّذِي هُوَ عِصْمَةُ أَمْرِي،

وَأَصْلِحْ لِي دُنْيَايَ الَّتِي فِيهَا مَعَاشِي

"O Allah, set right for me my religion which is the safeguard of my affairs, and set right for me my worldly life in which is my livelihood."
(Muslim)

Understanding the weight of amānah is the foundation. What a label actually does to a developing sense of self is what makes that weight impossible to ignore and that's where we turn next.

Chapter 2: What a Word Can Do to a Child

Before the Fiqh, the Facts

The next chapter in this book will turn to what the scholars said about harmful speech to children. But before we get there, we need to sit with something simpler and, in some ways, more sobering: what actually happens inside a child when a word is repeated to them enough times.

This matters because it's easy to treat "watch your words" as a nice-sounding piece of advice. I mean, the kind of thing that sits comfortably next to "be patient" and "make du'ā for your

children" without ever changing behaviour. It stops being comfortable once you understand the mechanism. A label is not just an unkind sentence that fades. It is something a child's mind actively uses to build the story of who they are.

A Child Is Building Themselves Out of What You Say

A young child does not yet have an independent, fully-formed sense of self. They are, in a very real sense, assembling one out of how they are treated, what they are told, and especially what is said about them by the people whose opinion they trust most: their parents.

This is not a modern psychological theory foreign to Islamic thought. It echoes something the Prophet ﷺ said about a much broader stage of life. He described every child as being born upon the *fiṭrah* which means the natural, unspoiled disposition and it is the parents who shape what that child becomes (Bukhārī and Muslim). The hadith is usually quoted in discussions about religion and belief, but its underlying principle applies just as directly here: children arrive without a fixed identity, and the people around them, chiefly their parents, are the ones doing the shaping.

When you tell a child, repeatedly, that they are "stubborn," you are not describing a trait you've observed from the outside. You are handing them a word, and they are building an identity

around it, because at that age they have no independent way to check whether the word is accurate. If a parent says it, it must be true.

The Difference Between a Behaviour and a Label

There is a distinction worth being precise about, because it's the hinge the rest of this book turns on: the difference between describing a behaviour and assigning an identity.

"You raised your voice at your sister just now" describes something that happened. It is specific, it is about an action, and, importantly, it leaves room for the child to be someone who does not do that tomorrow.

"You're a stubborn child" describes something the parent believes the child *is*. It is not about the moment. It is about the person and a child who hears this enough times does not walk away thinking "I did something stubborn." They walk away thinking "I am stubborn" which is an entirely different, and far heavier, thing to carry.

This is the core mechanism this whole book is concerned with. Correction targets behaviour and leaves the door open for change. Labelling targets identity and quietly closes it.

The Label Becomes the Ceiling

Once a child absorbs a label as part of their identity, it doesn't just sit there passively. It

starts to function as a ceiling on what they believe is possible for them.

A child repeatedly told "you're not intelligent" doesn't merely feel bad about a report card. They begin to interpret every future struggle through that label; a difficult exam doesn't mean "this topic is hard," it confirms "I am not intelligent, just like I was told." A child told "you're the difficult one" doesn't experience conflict with a sibling as a normal part of growing up, they experience it as more proof of a fixed trait everyone already agreed they have.

This is what makes labels so much more damaging than a single harsh moment. A single angry outburst, however painful, is an event a child can eventually place in the past. A label becomes a lens, something the child uses, often

without realising it, to interpret everything that happens to them afterward, for years, sometimes for the rest of their life.

It Doesn't Require Cruelty, Only Repetition

One of the most important things to understand about this is that it rarely comes from a cruel parent. Most parents who label their children this way love them deeply and would be devastated to think of themselves as causing harm. The damage doesn't require malice. It only requires repetition.

A word said once, in a moment of anger, and never repeated, is far less likely to become part of a child's identity. A word said casually, even affectionately, even as a "joke" the family

repeats about a child but said over and over across years, is exactly the kind of thing that settles in. This is why Chapter 4, which lists the labels parents use every day, includes not just obvious insults but also the softer, seemingly harmless ones like "the shy one," "the quiet one," "just like your father." Repetition, not harshness, is the active ingredient.

Why This Is Spiritually, Not Just Psychologically, Serious

It would be possible to read everything above and conclude this is simply good parenting psychology useful, but not distinctly Islamic. That would be a mistake, and it's worth being direct about why.

If a child is Allah's amānah placed in your care, as the previous chapter established, then shaping how that child sees themselves is not a neutral, secular activity you happen to be responsible for. It is part of the trust itself. A child who grows up believing because of what their parent repeated to them that they are inherently stubborn, inherently unintelligent, inherently the difficult one, has been shaped by their guardian in a way that may follow them into how they worship, how they treat their own children one day, and how they understand their own worth before Allah.

This is not a small, private parenting habit. It is the shepherd shaping the flock for better or worse and the coming chapters will show, in detail, both what the scholars said about this

responsibility and what a different way of speaking to children can look like in practice.

A Word Not Wasted

It's worth pairing this chapter's warning with a reassurance the Qur'an offers about speech generally. Allah reminds us that a person utters no word except that a watcher is present, ever recording (Sūrah Qāf, 50:18). Read only as a warning, that verse could feel crushing. Read fully, it's also a comfort that nothing is wasted in either direction. Every gentle word spoken to correct a child instead of condemn them is recorded with the same certainty as the harsh ones this chapter has been examining. A parent working to change their speech is not starting from zero each time they slip; every good word

still counts, and Allah does not need the record to be perfect before He begins to honour what's in it.

This matters because a chapter like this one can start to feel heavy by the time it ends. Children are remarkably resilient, and a parent reading this book with real concern for their child's wellbeing has already done the hardest part noticing. The chapters ahead are not a tally of damage already done. They are a practical way forward, starting from today.

Pause & Reflect

*- Think of one word you said this week that you'd want recorded exactly as it was said.
What made that one different?*

What Comes Next

The next chapter turns to the sources directly: what Islamic scholarship has said about harmful speech directed at children like cursing, degrading language, and labelling and where the boundaries of correction and discipline actually sit.

Chapter 3: A Rare Agreement (What the Scholars Say)

Not a Matter of Dispute

Most of the fiqh questions Nigerian Muslims are used to hearing about how to calculate zakāt, when the prayer time truly begins, what invalidates wuḍū' are areas where the four madhabs genuinely differ, sometimes significantly. That is normal, healthy, and part of the richness of the tradition.

This chapter is not that kind of chapter. What you are about to read is not a survey of four different opinions. It is closer to the opposite: a demonstration that harming a child with words

is one of the rare areas where Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfi‘ī, and Ḥanbalī scholars are not in disagreement at all because the prohibition does not come from a debated secondary ruling. It comes directly from the Qur'an and from the explicit, authentic words of the Prophet ﷺ himself. Where the primary texts are this direct, the madhabs converge rather than diverge. If anything, that unanimity should carry more weight with a reader than four competing opinions would because this is not one school's stringency against another's leniency. It is Islam speaking with one voice.

The Verse That Names the Exact Problem

Sūrah al-Hujurāt contains a verse that reads, almost uncannily, like it was written with this

book's subject in mind. Allah instructs the believers not to mock one another, not to find fault with one another, and specifically not to call one another by offensive nicknames, warning that it is wretched to carry a name associated with disobedience after having faith.

Classical commentators explain that the Arabic verb used for name-calling here, *tanābuz*, describes something back-and-forth and habitual, a repeated, mutual pattern of labelling rather than a single slip of the tongue. This is precisely the mechanism Chapter 2 described: not one harsh word, but a label that gets repeated until it sticks. Commentators also note something worth sitting with. The verse forbids believers from defaming "one another," using language that treats insulting a fellow

believer as a form of insulting yourself, because the community of belief is treated as a single connected body. A parent and child, bound by the closest tie in that community, are not exempt from this principle. If anything, they are the clearest case of it.

The Tongue That Sinks a Person for Seventy Years

Among the hadith most frequently cited on the danger of careless speech is one narrated by Abū Hurayrah, in which the Prophet ﷺ warned that a person may speak a word he thinks is trivial and insignificant, not realising it will cause him to fall into the Fire for a stretch of time far longer than the moment it

took to say it (Bukhārī). The comparable narration on the reward side is just as direct; a word spoken without much thought, but pleasing to Allah, can raise a person's rank in Paradise.

The lesson here is specifically about words we don't think carry weight, exactly the category "you're so stubborn" or "why can't you be like your sibling" falls into. These are not premeditated cruelties. They are exactly the kind of word the hadith is warning about: said quickly, forgotten by the speaker, and yet weighed by Allah regardless of whether the speaker meant anything serious by it.

This sits alongside another well-known principle the Prophet ﷺ established, that whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day

should either speak what is good or remain silent (Bukhārī and Muslim). This is a standard applied without exception for when the listener is young, related to us, or unlikely to talk back.

Cursing, Taunting, and What the Believer's Character Excludes

Separate from Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt, there is a substantial body of hadith specifically on cursing (*laʿn*) and insulting speech. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said that habitual cursing disqualifies a person from being among those who intercede or bear witness on the Day of Judgment (Muslim), and separately described the tongue of a true believer as one that does not taunt, curse, use obscenity, or shame others (Tirmidhī).

Scholars have long distinguished between cursing a category of wrongdoing in the abstract, which is permitted and cursing a specific person, which the Prophet ﷺ largely avoided and discouraged even toward people who had wronged him directly, with disagreement only over specific, unrepentant sinners, not over ordinary believers. A child, whatever mischief they've caused that afternoon, does not fall into any of the narrow categories scholars debated. They fall squarely into the category of "ordinary believer," the one the texts protect without dispute.

"No Harm, and No Returning of Harm"

One of the foundational legal maxims accepted across all four schools of fiqh is the principle

that there is to be no harm inflicted, and no harm returned in retaliation for harm (Ibn Mājah). This maxim is not a minor saying. It is one of the pillars jurists from every madhab use to derive rulings across enormous areas of Islamic law, from property disputes to neighbour relations to family life.

Applied here, the maxim does two things at once. First, it establishes that causing psychological harm to a child through repeated labelling is not outside the scope of "harm" simply because it leaves no visible mark. Dharar (harm) in fiqh has never been limited to the physical. Second, it closes off the common parental justification of "I'm only saying this because they harmed me first" frustration, embarrassment, or exhaustion a child has

caused a parent does not license harm returned in kind, according to the very maxim that makes this such a central rule of Islamic law in the first place.

The Prophet ﷺ and the Names He Personally Changed

Perhaps the most concrete evidence available to us isn't a general principle at all, it's the Prophet's ﷺ own recorded behaviour toward names and what they do to a person's sense of self.

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb had a daughter whose name meant "the disobedient one." The Prophet ﷺ personally renamed her Jamīlah, "the beautiful one" (Abū Dāwūd). A man named Ḥazn, meaning "rugged, harsh ground,"

was told by the Prophet ﷺ that he was better named Sahl, "smooth, easy" though the man in this instance declined, and his descendant as Ibn al-Musayyib later remarked that hardship followed the family ever since as a result. And when a child's birth-name was found unsuitable, the Prophet ﷺ personally overruled it and renamed the boy al-Munthir, a name that stuck for the rest of the child's life (Bukhārī and Muslim).

None of these were legal obligations. Changing an unpleasant name is something scholars generally classify as recommended rather than compulsory. What matters for our purposes isn't the ruling, it's the pattern. The Prophet ﷺ treated the words attached to a person's identity as important enough to personally

intervene over, again and again, across companions of every age. If he considered an inherited *name* worth correcting because of what it might do to a person's self-perception, it is not a stretch. It is the same principle applied consistently to say the *labels* we improvise on the spot deserve at least the same concern.

Al-Ghazālī and the "Uncut Jewel"

No single scholar's writing on raising children has been more widely read across all four madhabs than Imām al-Ghazālī's chapter on disciplining children in *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. Al-Ghazālī was Shāfi'ī in his legal training, but his stature transcends any one school. A later scholar remarked that if every other book of

Islamic learning were lost except this one, it would still be enough.

His description of a child could have been written for this book directly: a child is a trust placed in a parent's care, a pure heart like an uncut jewel with no fixed form yet, ready to be shaped by whatever guidance it receives. That is the *amānah* language from Chapter 1, coming from an eleventh-century scholar rather than a contemporary one.

Al-Ghazālī then makes a specific, practical warning that speaks directly to this book's subject: a child should not be rebuked excessively, because habitual condemnation and scolding wears down the value of correction in the child's heart until it stops working at all. In other words, even from a

purely disciplinary standpoint, without touching the spiritual dimension yet, constant negative labelling doesn't even achieve what parents intend by it. It doesn't produce a corrected child. It produces a child who has stopped listening.

What This Chapter Establishes

Put together, this is not four scholars from four schools arriving separately at four different conclusions. It is one unbroken line, Qur'an, authentic hadith, foundational legal maxims, and the Prophet's ﷺ own recorded practice, all pointing at the same thing from different directions: that the words a parent repeats to a child are not neutral, are not a private matter exempt from the general rules on speech, and

are treated with a seriousness that has nothing to do with which madhab a household happens to follow.

Pause & Reflect

- Before reading this chapter, would you have guessed this was an area of scholarly agreement rather than dispute?

The next chapter takes this from principle to specifics, the actual labels, the ones almost every Nigerian Muslim household has used at some point, said so casually that most parents don't register them as the kind of speech this chapter has just spent several pages establishing a serious prohibition against.

Chapter 4: The Labels We Say Every Day

The Words That Don't Feel Like Words

Ask most Nigerian Muslim parents whether they've ever cursed their child, and the honest majority will say no. Ask them whether they've ever called their child *olodo*, *omo were*, stubborn, useless, or told them "you'll never amount to anything" in a moment of frustration and the answer changes. These don't register as the same category of speech, because they don't feel like insults in the moment. They feel like description. Like an honest assessment of what's in front of you.

That's exactly what makes them dangerous, and exactly why this chapter exists, laid out here in full, deliberately long, because the point of this chapter is recognition. The longer the list, the more likely you are to find your own voice somewhere in it.

A Note on Language Before the List

This book is written for Nigerian Muslim households broadly, not for one linguistic community. Every household reading this carries its own version of these words in Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Nigerian Pidgin, or a mix that shifts depending on who's in the room. Rather than fix the list to any single language, what follows names the *categories* these words fall into, with a small number of

widely-recognisable examples for illustration. As you read each category, the honest exercise is to translate it into whatever your own household actually says, the specific words in your mother tongue that carry the weight described below. If you find yourself thinking "that's not quite what we say, but I know exactly what we say instead," the chapter has done its job.

Category One: The Obvious Insults

These are the ones most parents already suspect are wrong, even if they still slip out under pressure. They are words like "dunce," "fool," "useless," "idiot," "disgrace," "wretched child," "you have no shame." Nigerian households will recognise their own

household's version immediately. The exact word varies by tongue; what doesn't vary is the register which are flatly negative, aimed at the child's worth rather than their conduct, often reached for automatically under pressure.

Most parents who use these know, somewhere, that they're not proud of it. The guilt that follows is often real but guilt without a framework for change tends to just repeat the cycle next time patience runs out. That framework is what the remaining chapters of this book are for.

Category Two: The "Positive" Labels That Function the Same Way

This category is more dangerous precisely because it doesn't feel like a category at all.

These are said warmly, sometimes proudly, often in front of guests as if describing a fixed and settled fact:

- "He's the stubborn one"
- "She's the quiet one"
- "He's the troublesome child"
- "She's shy"
- "He's not really the intelligent one, his brother is"
- "She's too emotional"
- "You're just like your father" (said as an accusation, not a compliment)
- "You're the black sheep of the family"
- "He's always been difficult, since birth"
- "She's the sensitive one, don't mind her"
- "He's a handful, always has been"

- "That's just how she is" (said dismissively, closing off the possibility of change)

None of these sound cruel out loud. Said once, they might genuinely just be an observation. Said for the tenth, fiftieth, hundredth time in front of the child, about the child, as though the child isn't fully present or capable of hearing and absorbing it, they stop being observation and become verdict. Chapter 2 explained the mechanism: a child does not have an independent way to check whether a repeated label is accurate. If a parent says it enough times, it becomes who the child believes they are, whether the label was originally meant as an insult or not.

Category Three: The Comparison Labels

A close cousin of the above, but specific enough to name separately, because it is one of the most common patterns in Nigerian households with more than one child:

- "Why can't you be like your sister?"
- "Your brother would never do this"
- "See how well your cousin is doing"
- "You're not as smart as your mate's child"
- "Look at [name], and look at you"
- "Everyone in this family is doing well except you"
- "Your sister was never like this at your age"
- "Even your younger brother understands better than you"

These labels don't just tell a child who they are, they tell a child who they are *in relation to*

someone else, usually someone the child already has to live alongside. This creates a particular kind of damage that goes beyond the individual child's self-image; it shapes how siblings see each other, and how they'll go on treating each other long after they've left the house. That dynamic is significant enough that it gets its own chapter later in this book.

Category Four: The Destiny Labels

These are the heaviest category, because instead of describing a trait, they pronounce a future:

- "You'll never learn"
- "You'll never change"
- "You'll amount to nothing"

- "This child will never make it in life"
- "You'll end up like [a relative regarded as a failure or disgrace]"
- "You're finished" / "Your life is finished"
- "There's no hope for you"
- "You'll never be successful"
- "This is how you'll be forever"

A trait-label tells a child something about who they are today. A destiny-label tells a child something about who they will always be, closing a door before the child has had the chance to prove otherwise. Said by a parent, whose word a young child has no reason to doubt, this isn't experienced as an exaggeration in anger. It's experienced as a prophecy from the one person whose opinion matters most.

Category Five: The Labels Disguised as Prayers or Warnings

A category particular enough to Muslim households that it deserves its own entry is words framed as du'ā, warning, or spiritual concern, but functioning exactly like a destiny label:

- "May Allah help this child" (said with exasperation, implying the child is beyond ordinary help)
- "This child will be the death of me"
- "I have handed you over to Allah" (said as a statement of having given up, rather than genuine tawakkul)
- "You'll disgrace this family in front of Allah and everyone"

These are worth flagging separately because they can feel, to the parent saying them, like they're doing something religious rather than something harmful because invoking Allah's name doesn't automatically make a statement du'ā in spirit rather than condemnation in disguise.

Where These Words Actually Get Said

Language aside, there are household patterns common across Nigerian Muslim families, regardless of tribe that make these labels more frequent and more damaging than they might otherwise be, simply because of who's present when they're said.

A child corrected in front of extended family visiting for the weekend absorbs the label with an audience attached. It isn't just a parent's private opinion anymore, it's now something aunts, uncles, and cousins have heard and may repeat. In households with co-wives, a label given to one woman's child can carry an extra weight the parent may not intend, read by the child as confirmation of where they rank among their half-siblings. House-help and older relatives living in the home often repeat labels they've heard the parents use, sometimes more bluntly, and a child has no way of distinguishing "what my mother says" from "what everyone in this house says about me." And Qur'anic school or makaranta teachers trusted almost as much as parents in many households are a second, powerful source of

exactly this kind of language; a child labelled *olodo* at home and *ba ka gane ba* (you don't understand) at makaranta hears the same verdict from both directions, with no third voice to contradict it.

None of this is about which language a household speaks. It's about how many people, in how many settings, end up repeating the same handful of words about the same child and Chapter 2 already established that repetition, not any single household's dialect, is what turns a word into a belief.

Why "I Didn't Mean It" Doesn't Undo It

A common, understandable response to reading a list like this is: *but I don't mean it that*

way, I say it out of love, or frustration, not hatred.

That's almost certainly true for most parents reading this book, and it matters because intention affects sin in the sight of Allah, and a parent who slips in a moment of exhaustion is in a very different position than one who deliberately sets out to wound. But intention, as established in Chapter 2, does not change what the *child* absorbs. A child does not experience a label filtered through the parent's private intention. They experience the words themselves, repeated, out loud, about them. The mechanism of harm runs through repetition, not motive which is precisely why this book is not interested in assigning blame,

only in helping you notice what you may not have been noticing.

Pause & Reflect

- *Which of the words in this chapter have you said not once in anger, but as a repeated description about your own child?*
- *Which category did it fall into: obvious insult, "positive" label, comparison, or destiny label?*

The next chapter goes further into what happens on the other side of that repetition, what it looks like when a child stops merely hearing a label and starts believing it, and how that belief begins to reshape decisions, relationships, and self-worth well into adulthood.

Chapter 5: When the Child Believes the Label

From Hearing to Believing

There is a difference between a child *hearing* a label and a child *believing* it, and that difference is the entire subject of this chapter. Chapter 4 catalogued the words. This chapter is about what happens after the words have been said enough times that the child stops experiencing them as something said *to* them and starts experiencing them as something true *about* them.

That shift doesn't happen on a fixed timeline, and it rarely happens because of one dramatic

moment. It happens the way most durable beliefs form in a young mind, quietly, through repetition, until the label stops sounding like an opinion and starts sounding like a fact the child has simply always known about themselves.

Consider a boy of nine, sitting a mathematics test he has actually studied for. He freezes on the second question, not because it's beyond him, but because a familiar sentence arrives before the working-out does: "you're not really the intelligent one." He didn't invent that sentence. It was given to him, over several years, by people who loved him and were only ever comparing him fondly to an older brother. By the time the exam is over, the sentence has done more to the result than the studying did.

The Moment a Description Becomes an Identity

Consider the difference between these two sentences, said to the same child on the same day: "You forgot your homework again" and "You're so forgetful, you'll never remember anything." The first is corrective, it points at an event. The second is definitional, it points at the child's core self.

A child who hears the second version enough times begins reasoning backward from it. They don't think, "I forgot something today." They think, "I forgot something today, *because* I am forgetful. This is simply confirmation of what I already am." Once a child reaches that point, every future forgetful moment stops being a normal, correctable part of growing up and becomes fresh evidence for a verdict that was

handed down long ago. The label has stopped describing behaviour and started interpreting it.

This is the mechanism behind what is often called a self-fulfilling prophecy, though the concept did not need modern language to be understood, it is simply the natural consequence of treating a child's *fiṭrah*, their unformed disposition, as something already fixed and finished, when Chapter 2 already established that it is precisely the opposite: something still being shaped by the very words being used to describe it.

"I Am As My Servant Expects of Me"

There is a hadith qudsī, narrated by Abū Hurayrah, in which Allah says that He deals with His servant according to what that servant expects of Him (Bukhārī and Muslim). Scholars have long drawn out the practical implication of this Hadith. A person's expectation shapes the reality they experience, because a servant who approaches Allah expecting mercy and acceptance carries themselves, worships, and repents differently than one who has convinced themselves they are beyond hope.

This is not a direct ruling about parenting, and it would be a mistake to force the analogy too far. But the underlying principle, that a settled expectation about oneself actively shapes how a person moves through the world is exactly what's happening when a child settles into a

label. A child who has been told, repeatedly, that they are "the difficult one" does not merely feel that way. They begin behaving in ways that produce more evidence for it, not because the label was accurate to begin with, but because they have started acting from inside it. The label stopped being a description of the past and became a script for the future, a smaller, harder version of the very mechanism the hadith describes on the far larger scale of a servant's relationship with their Lord.

What This Looks Like in a Growing Child

The believed label doesn't stay confined to the specific behaviour it originally described. It expands, quietly, into areas that have nothing to do with the original comment.

A child labelled "not intelligent" over school performance often stops raising their hand in class not because they don't know the answer, but because the risk of confirming the label again feels worse than staying silent. A child labelled "stubborn" during ordinary toddler defiance may, years later, avoid healthy disagreement altogether, or swing the opposite way and dig into every disagreement as if their identity depends on winning it. A child labelled "the shy one" may never test whether they're actually capable of speaking up, because the label was handed to them before they'd had the chance to find out for themselves.

It Doesn't Stay in Childhood

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about a believed label is that it rarely expires when the child grows up. It tends to travel into how they see themselves as a spouse, as a worker, as a Muslim striving to grow closer to Allah, and eventually as a parent themselves.

An adult still quietly convinced they are "the useless one" or "the failure of the family" often continues making decisions from inside that label decades after the parent who first said it has forgotten they ever said it. They may avoid opportunities they were genuinely capable of. They may accept treatment from others that confirms the old label, because it feels more familiar than believing something better about themselves. And this is the part most relevant

to a book on parenting. They very often go on to unconsciously repeat the same labels on their own children, not out of cruelty, but because it is the only model of correction they were ever given.

This is precisely why this book is written for two audiences at once, as the earlier chapters signalled. If you recognised your parents' voice in Chapter 4's list before you recognised your own, that recognition is not a distraction from this book's purpose. It is the same subject, viewed from the other side of it.

Signs Your Child May Already Be Carrying Your Words

Some children announce a believed label outright "I'm just not smart like that." Most

don't. The signs tend to be quieter, and easy to mistake for personality rather than evidence of something a child has absorbed. A few worth watching for, not as a diagnosis, but as a prompt to look closer:

- **They use the label on themselves before anyone else can.** A child who says "I'm just clumsy" while laughing it off has often learned to get there first, so it lands softer than waiting for someone else to say it.
- **They give up unusually quickly on the exact thing they've been labelled about.** A child called "not academic" who stops attempting hard questions isn't lazy. They're avoiding fresh evidence for a verdict already delivered.

- **They repeat the label onto a younger sibling.** A child who has absorbed "the difficult one" will sometimes hand the same word to a brother or sister, almost word for word, without any adult present.
- **They seem surprised by ordinary praise.** A child who reacts to genuine encouragement with suspicion or deflection is often working from a settled, different picture of themselves underneath.
- **They over-apologise for things that don't need an apology.** This is common in children carrying a "difficult" or "troublesome" label, a constant, low-level bracing for correction.
- **They describe themselves to others using your exact words.** Not their own language for it but yours. A child who

tells a teacher or a friend "I'm the naughty one" in the family is, often unknowingly, quoting you directly.

None of these signs, on their own, proves a label has settled in. Children are complicated, and a single instance of any of these can mean nothing at all. What's worth attention is the pattern, and whether it clusters specifically around a word you recognise from Chapter 4.

What You Risk Losing If Nothing Changes

It's worth being plain about what's actually at stake here, rather than leaving it abstract.

The most immediate loss is closeness. A child who has learned that a specific subject like their intelligence, their temperament, their worth compared to a sibling, reliably produces

a hard word from you will start managing what they let you see. This is not out of rebellion, but out of the same instinct any of us have toward a source of reliable pain: avoidance. Parents who wonder, years later, why a teenager has gone quiet with them specifically on the subjects that matter most are often looking at the long-run result of exactly this.

The second loss is harder to see because it never announces itself: the version of your child that the label quietly closed off. Chapter 2 already explained the mechanism, a label becomes a ceiling, and a child stops testing what's above it. You will not be shown, at any point, what your child might have attempted, built, or become if a specific sentence had never been repeated to them. That's not a loss

you get to grieve, because you never get to see its shape. It simply doesn't happen.

The third is the one Chapter 5 has already spent the most time on: the label rarely stops with your child. If it settles in unaddressed, it tends to reappear a generation later, on a grandchild you may live to meet, spoken by a son or daughter who learned, from you, that this is simply how correction sounds in your family.

None of this is offered to frighten you into vigilance you can't sustain. That isn't how lasting change works, and a parent operating from fear tends to overcorrect in ways that create new problems. It's offered because the story that opened Chapter 10 of this book is not a rare, extreme case. It is the ordinary result of

an ordinary word, repeated for long enough, in a household where no one thought to stop and ask what it was costing.

Where This Leaves Us

None of this is presented to induce despair. A believed label is not a permanent sentence, and later chapters deal directly with how it can be undone, both in a child still forming and in an adult who has carried one for years. If you recognised your own childhood more than your child's in this chapter, Chapter 9 is written directly for you. But before we get to correction and repair, it was necessary to be honest about what's actually at stake. This is not a chapter about hurt feelings. It is a chapter about how a child's sense of what they are capable of in this

life and in their relationship with Allah gets quietly built, brick by brick, out of words a parent may have already forgotten saying.

Pause & Reflect

- Is there a label you believed about yourself for years before you ever questioned whether it was true?

رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي وَيَسِّرْ لِي أَمْرِي

"My Lord, expand for me my chest and ease for me my task." (Sūrah Ṭāhā, 20:25–26)

The next chapter turns to the alternative: how the Prophet ﷺ corrected children and companions when they erred, without ever reaching for the kind of language this book has spent five chapters examining.

Chapter 6: Correcting Without Condemning

Two Questions Worth Answering Directly

Before going further, two objections deserve a direct answer, because readers who are quietly asking them will discount everything else in this chapter until they're addressed.

The first: *does this mean I should never correct my child firmly?* No. Firmness and labelling are not the same thing, and this book has never argued otherwise. A parent can be firm, immediate, and serious about a child's misbehaviour while still aiming the correction at the act rather than the child's worth. What

this book objects to is not firmness, it's the habit of reaching for a verdict on the child's character when a specific instruction would do the job better and do it without lasting cost.

The second: *isn't this just gentle-parenting with Arabic terms attached?* No, and the distinction matters. Gentle-parenting approaches, as popularly practised, often avoid firm correction altogether out of concern for a child's feelings. Nothing in this book asks a parent to do that. The standard here comes from amānah, ḥuqūq al-ʿibād, and the Prophet's ﷺ own recorded practice and not from a contemporary parenting philosophy borrowing religious vocabulary for credibility. A parent who corrects firmly, immediately, and without

cursing or labelling is following the Sunnah described in this chapter exactly as intended.

What This Book Does Not Cover

One more point of scope, stated plainly rather than left implicit: this book is about speech, not about the separate fiqh discussion around physical discipline, including the well-known hadith instructing parents to direct a child toward prayer from age seven and, if needed, to use physical correction from age ten (Abū Dāwūd). That is a distinct area of fiqh, with its own conditions, limits, and scholarly discussion, and it is deliberately outside the scope of this book. Nothing here should be read as a position on that question in either direction. This book's subject is narrower and,

for most households, more immediately actionable: what comes out of a parent's mouth, not what does or doesn't happen with a parent's hand.

The Standard Was Never "Never Correct"

Nothing in this book so far should be read as a case against correcting children. A parent who never corrects a child isn't practising mercy, they're neglecting a duty. Chapter 1 established that a child is an amānah; part of that trust is precisely the responsibility to guide, correct, and discipline. The question this book has been raising was never *whether* to correct a child. It's *how*.

The clearest place to see the answer is not in a manual, it's in how the Prophet ﷺ actually corrected the people closest to him, children included, across a documented life of doing exactly that, thousands of times, under far more provocation than most of us will ever face from our own children.

Ten Years, and Not Once "Why Did You Do That?"

Anas ibn Mālik was handed over by his mother to serve the Prophet ﷺ as a young boy, and remained in that role for ten years, a decade during which a child inevitably makes mistakes, forgets tasks, and does things imperfectly, exactly as your own children do. Anas later said, plainly: for those ten years, the

Prophet ﷺ never once said "uff" to him, and never once demanded to know why he had done something, or why he hadn't (Bukhārī and Muslim).

It's worth noticing the specific word Anas used: *uff*. It's not a curse or an insult. It's a small sound of exasperation, the sigh, the "ugh," the sharp exhale a tired parent makes without even choosing to. It's the same word the Qur'an singles out in the context of aging parents, instructing children never to say so much as "uff" to a parent who has become a burden in old age (Sūrah al-Isrā', 17:23). Read the two together, and a standard emerges that cuts in both directions. The same restraint owed to an elderly parent was, in practice, the restraint the

Prophet ﷺ showed toward a child in his care for ten uninterrupted years.

Correction Aimed at the Act, Not the Boy

The eating incident referenced earlier is worth returning to here for a different reason. 'Umar ibn Abī Salamah was a young boy whose hand wandered across the shared plate as he ate. The Prophet ﷺ did not say "you have terrible manners" or "you're so greedy." He said four things: mention Allah's name, eat with your right hand, and eat from what's in front of you (Bukhārī and Muslim), addressing him warmly as "O young boy," a term of affectionate address, not rebuke.

Notice what's absent. No character judgment, no comparison to another child, no conclusion drawn about who the boy *is*. Just a specific behaviour, named specifically, followed by specific instruction, precisely the behaviour-versus-identity distinction Chapter 2 introduced. 'Umar ibn Abī Salamah didn't walk away from that moment believing he was a bad or greedy child. He walked away, by his own account, having simply changed how he ate from then on.

When a Child's Feelings Were Taken Seriously

There is a shorter, gentler hadith that shows a different dimension of this same character. Anas ibn Mālik had a younger brother, a small

boy nicknamed Abū 'Umayr, who kept a small pet bird. When the bird died, the boy was visibly grieving. The Prophet ﷺ, rather than dismissing a child's sadness over "just a bird" as something too trivial to acknowledge, gently asked him what had happened to his little bird using the boy's affectionate nickname, meeting him at the level of his loss rather than minimising it (Bukhārī and Muslim, and related collections).

This matters for a book about words, because correction is not the only kind of speech parents owe their children. A child whose sadness is taken seriously by an adult learns that their inner world matters to the people raising them, which is, quietly, the opposite

lesson a label like "too emotional" or "too sensitive" teaches.

Correction of an Adult, in Public, Without Humiliation

One more example, involving not a child but a grown man, is worth including here because it shows the same principle applied under real pressure. A Bedouin once urinated in a corner of the mosque. The Companions moved to seize and rebuke him on the spot. The Prophet ﷺ stopped them, told them to leave him until he finished, and only afterward calmly, without raising his voice, without humiliating the man in front of the gathered Companions, explained that a mosque is not a place for that, and that it exists for prayer and the

remembrance of Allah (Bukhārī and Muslim).

Only then did he have the area cleaned.

If this is how the Prophet ﷺ chose to handle a grown man who had just defiled the mosque itself, one of the more serious breaches of adab imaginable in that setting, it sets a ceiling, not a floor, for how a parent might justify raising their voice at a child who forgot to put away their shoes.

What the Pattern Adds Up To

Across all of these narrations, a consistent shape emerges, and it maps directly onto the distinction this book has been building since Chapter 2:

- **Correction targets the specific act**, not the child's character. Use "you left food on the plate" rather than "you're greedy."
- **Timing matters.** The Bedouin was corrected after the act, once emotions and immediate danger had settled, not mid-crisis.
- **Tone carries the message as much as the words.** "O young boy," "O Abū 'Umayr" affectionate address, not a raised voice.
- **The correction ends when the lesson is delivered.** No prolonged rebuke, no repetition of the fault, no reminder of past failures dragged into the present one.

None of this requires a parent to become permissive or to abandon discipline. It requires something harder: separating the discipline a child needs from the identity-shaping language

this book has spent five chapters warning against and the Prophet ﷺ, across a lifetime of correcting people far less patient with him than his own children are with you, showed that the two were never the same thing.

A Direct Swap for Each Category

Chapter 4 catalogued the labels at length. Here is the same ground, converted into something usable in the actual moment a label is about to come out:

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
"You're so stubborn"	"You're not doing what I asked. Help me understand why"

The Weight of Your Words

Instead of saying...	Try saying...
"You're useless / a disgrace"	"This isn't the standard I know you can meet. Let's fix it"
"You'll never learn"	"This one didn't go well. What do we try differently next time?"
"Why can't you be like your sister?"	"Let's talk about what happened with you, just you"
"He's the difficult one"	"He had a hard moment today"
"She's just like that, always has been"	"She's still working this one out"
"You're the black sheep of this family"	(no substitute. Say nothing, and revisit Chapter 8)
"See your mates"	"Where do you think you got stuck?"

The pattern across every row is the same one this chapter has been building: name the moment, not the person. Keep this list somewhere visible. The point isn't to memorise it, it's to have something other than the old sentence ready when you're too tired to compose one from scratch.

This is, in the end, the same standard the Qur'an sets for speech generally. Allah instructs that people be spoken to in the best possible way (Sūrah al-Isrā', 17:53). A few verses earlier in the same sūrah, Allah instructs a child to lower the wing of humility toward aging parents out of mercy (17:24). The same posture, aimed the other direction, is what this chapter has been describing all along. Correction delivered with that kind of lowered, deliberate

gentleness is not a lesser form of discipline than a raised voice. It is simply discipline aimed correctly.

Pause & Reflect

- Pick one line from the table above and say it out loud, in your own words, the way you'd actually say it to your child. Does it feel natural yet, or still unfamiliar?

A different pattern still needs its own attention: what happens when different children in the same family are handed different labels like "he's the smart one" and "she's the difficult one," said about siblings living under the same roof, doing damage that a single child's label alone does not.

Chapter 7: When Siblings Receive Different Labels

A Gift That Had to Be Taken Back

There's a well-known incident from the life of the Companions that most Muslim households have heard in the context of money, but which applies just as directly to something most parents never think to apply it to: words.

Bashīr ibn Sa'd wanted to give his son Nu'mān a gift which is a servant and, at his wife's insistence, brought the matter to the Prophet ﷺ so he could witness it. The Prophet ﷺ asked a simple question first: had he given the same to all his children? Bashīr answered no.

The Prophet ﷺ told him plainly to take the gift back, and in the fuller narration, gave the instruction that has echoed through Muslim households ever since: fear Allah, and be just among your children (Bukhārī and Muslim).

What's striking, reading this hadith again as a parent rather than as a student memorising hadith for a class, is how small the original imbalance was. One gift, to one child, while the others received nothing that day. The Prophet ﷺ didn't ask whether it was a big gift or a small one, whether Nu'mān deserved it more, or whether the other children would even notice. The imbalance itself was the problem.

The Principle Was Never Only About Money

Scholars who have written on this hadith have been explicit that its scope reaches beyond gifts and inheritance. One contemporary treatment of the hadith states plainly that justice between children covers wealth, treatment, attention, speech, and the showing of love, not gifts alone. That same discussion makes an important, honest distinction: a parent's heart may naturally incline more toward one child, through no real fault of their own, and this inward feeling is not itself sinful or fully controllable. What is required is that the inward inclination never becomes outward injustice in gifts, yes, but just as much in the words a parent actually says out loud.

This is the missing half of the fairness conversation in most Muslim households.

Parents who would never dream of giving one child a phone and the other nothing will, without a second thought, introduce their children to guests with completely different scripts: "this one's the brilliant one," and, standing right next to him, "this one's more... the quiet type." No object changed hands. But a gift was still given unevenly, the gift of being spoken of well.

What Children Hear When Labels Are Compared

Chapter 5 explained what happens when a single child absorbs a repeated label. In a household with more than one child, there's an additional layer. Children don't just hear their

own label. They hear their sibling's label too, and they compare.

"He's the brilliant one" is not experienced by the brother standing next to him as a neutral compliment about someone else. It's experienced as information about himself, specifically, that whatever he is, he is *not that*.

"She's the quiet one" tells her louder sibling, just as loudly, that boldness in this family belongs to someone else. Parents intend these as harmless descriptions, sometimes even as a way to make each child feel individually seen. Children receive them as a family ledger being read aloud, a permanent assignment of roles that was decided before they had any say in it.

The specific danger of sibling labels is that they don't just shape a child's view of themselves.

They shape how each child sees the others for the rest of their lives. Which means the "smart one" resenting the pressure that title carries, the "difficult one" resenting a reputation he never agreed to, and both of them, often, carrying that resentment quietly into adulthood, into how they treat each other at family gatherings, into how they raise their own children.

"He's the Difficult One," Meant as Description

It's worth being precise about something here, because most parents who do this are not trying to create hierarchy. They're trying to make sense of two very different children living in the same house. A parent who says "he's the

difficult one, she's the easy one" often believes they are simply describing an observable, honest difference in temperament, not issuing a permanent ranking.

But a child does not receive it as a temperament note. A child receives it as an identity, assigned in comparison to a sibling who is standing right there, and unlike an adult, a child has no way of hearing "difficult, compared to your sister today." They hear "difficult," full stop, forever, next to her, who is not. This is the label problem from Chapter 4, but with a second child now standing inside the frame, absorbing the inverse of whatever was just said.

What Fairness in Speech Actually Requires

The Prophet's ﷺ instruction to Bashīr wasn't "give both children something," which would have been satisfied by any token gesture. It was to be just, a standard higher than mere equal quantity, closer to equal *regard*. Applied to speech, this doesn't mean parents must say identical things about each child, which would be both impossible and dishonest; children genuinely differ, and pretending otherwise helps no one. It means a parent has to notice when a description of one child is quietly functioning as a verdict on another, and refuse to let that stand unspoken.

In practice, this looks like catching the comparative label before it leaves your mouth, not "he's the smart one," but simply noticing

and naming what this particular child did well, without an implicit ranking against a brother or sister who didn't do the same thing that day. It looks like discussing a child's struggles with them privately, not in front of the sibling who will now quietly file away "so that's not who I have to be." And it looks like remembering that the amānah from Chapter 1 was never given to you as a single, undivided trust. It was given to you once for each child, individually, in full, with no permission to let one child's portion of your good opinion be defined by contrast with another's.

Pause & Reflect

- Do my children receive noticeably different words from me, not just different treatment?

- If I said out loud what I believe about each of my children, would any of them be surprised, or hurt, to hear it?

- Is there a comparison I make often enough that my children could probably finish the sentence for me?

What Comes Next

Everything so far in this book has assumed the labelling comes from the parent reading it. But in most Nigerian Muslim households, parents are not the only voice a child hears. The next chapter turns to the people standing just outside a parent's direct control like grandparents, relatives, and teachers and what a parent can do when the label isn't theirs to begin with.

The Weight of Your Words

Chapter 8: When the Label Comes From Someone Else

"I Don't Say These Things, My Mother Does"

Almost every parent who reads the first seven chapters of this book will, at some point, think of someone other than themselves. This is not out of deflection. Most parents reading this far are genuinely willing to examine their own speech. But in a great many Nigerian Muslim households, some of the most repeated labels a child hears were never said by the parent at all.

"He's the troublesome one." "She's useless, just like her mother was at that age." "Your uncle was exactly like this, and see how he turned

out." These are said by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and senior relatives, often people the parent themselves was raised to never talk back to, which is precisely what makes this chapter necessary. A parent who has spent months unlearning their own labelling habits can still watch a child absorb the same damage from a grandmother's mouth in a single Sunday visit, and feel powerless to say anything about it.

The Respect Owed to Elders Does Not Require Silence

It's worth naming the tension directly, because it's real. Islam places enormous weight on honouring parents and elders, and a grown child correcting their own mother in front of a room of relatives feels, to most people raised in

this culture, close to unthinkable. This chapter is not asking you to do that.

What it is asking is narrower. Respecting an elder's status is not the same as staying silent while your own child is being shaped by words you've spent this entire book learning to guard against. A parent can honour a grandparent's position in the family and still, privately, gently, and repeatedly if necessary, ask that a specific label not be repeated in front of the children. The same way a parent might quietly ask a relative not to discuss money problems in front of the kids, without it being read as disrespect. Chapter 1 established that the amānah of a child was given specifically to the parent, not diffused across the household. That

responsibility to protect doesn't pause because the person speaking is senior in age.

When the Label Comes From a Teacher

There is one more source of labelling worth a section of its own: the makaranta or Qur'anic school teacher, and the classroom teacher more broadly. Chapter 4 already touched on this, but it deserves more room here, because of how much weight a child gives to a teacher's words.

Many Muslim adults, asked to name the single sentence that shaped how they saw their own intelligence, will not name a parent at all. They'll name a teacher, a specific voice, in a specific room, saying some version of "you'll never understand this," or reading out a poor

result in front of the class. A parent can spend years being careful with their own words at home and still watch a child come back from Qur'anic school carrying a label that will take just as long to undo, because the mechanism from Chapter 5 doesn't care where the repeated word came from only that it was repeated, by someone the child trusted.

Where possible, this calls for the same quiet advocacy described above with grandparents: a respectful word with the teacher, an ear kept open for what a child reports coming home from lessons, and, perhaps most practically, enough of this book's framework shared at home that a child who does hear "you'll never understand" from someone else has at least one place where they consistently hear otherwise.

Pause & Reflect

- *Which relative is most likely to label my child, and have I ever actually asked them to stop or only felt uncomfortable and said nothing?*
- *What does my child report about how they're spoken to at school or makaranta, when I actually ask?*
- *Am I protecting my children from labels I can't control, or only from the ones I say myself?*

What Comes Next

Every chapter so far has looked outward at what a parent says, and now at what others around a child say. The next chapter turns the book fully around, toward the reader who has been quietly present in every chapter without being addressed directly: the adult who is not asking how to raise a child well, but who is still,

in some private way, living inside a label
someone gave them decades ago.

Chapter 9: When You Were the Labelled Child

**Written for the Reader Who Bought This
Book for Their Children, and Is Finishing
It for Themselves**

Somewhere across the last eight chapters, a specific kind of recognition has probably happened more than once not "that's my child," but "that was me." This chapter is for that recognition, addressed directly rather than left as a footnote.

Most readers of this book picked it up as parents, wanting to raise their children better than they were raised, or better than they've raised their own children so far. Fewer expected

the book to turn around and ask about their own childhood. But Chapter 5 already established something that makes this unavoidable: a believed label doesn't expire when the child grows up. If you're still, quietly, carrying one, it deserves its own chapter rather than a passing mention.

How You Stop Believing What You Were Called

There is no single sentence that undoes a label absorbed as a child, and this book won't pretend otherwise. But there is a starting point, and it's the same one Chapter 2 used to explain how the label was built in the first place. A label is not a fact, it is a repeated sentence

someone said, and repeated sentences can be examined rather than simply inherited.

This means asking, deliberately, the question a child never had the tools to ask: was this actually true, or was it simply said often enough that it stopped feeling like an opinion? A parent's word carries enormous weight precisely because a child has no independent way to verify it. An adult does. You can now ask whether "you were never the intelligent one" survives contact with your actual adult life, the problems you've solved, the responsibilities you've carried, the things you've learned since anyone had the chance to call you slow. Often it doesn't survive that scrutiny at all. It was never evidence. It was just repetition, mistaken for

evidence because no one contradicted it at the time.

How You Forgive a Parent Who Labelled You

This is harder ground, and it's worth being honest that this book cannot resolve every reader's specific situation. But a few things are worth holding onto.

Chapter 8 discussed what tawbah requires of a parent who labelled their child regret, acknowledgment, and repair, not istighfār alone, because the wrong touches ḥuqūq al-‘ibād. That chapter was written to the parent. This is its mirror, written to the child: forgiveness is not the same as pretending the harm didn't happen, and Islam does not

require you to erase what was real in order to move forward. What it does offer is a way to hold both things at once that a parent may have genuinely loved you, and also genuinely wronged you with their words, often without knowing the weight of what they were doing, shaped by their own upbringing in a household that may have done the same to them. Understanding where a label came from does not obligate you to carry it any further. It simply makes it easier to put down without bitterness attached to the putting-down.

How You Avoid Repeating the Cycle

The most practical use of this chapter, for most readers, will be this: recognising your own label is often the only way to stop passing it on.

Chapter 5 noted that adults who still believe an old label about themselves very often repeat it, unconsciously, on their own children not from cruelty, but because it is the only model of correction they were ever shown.

Breaking that requires the same tool the rest of this book has been offering the whole way through noticing the specific word before it becomes a pattern, the same discipline Chapter 9's word log asks of every parent. The difference is that you now have a reason that goes beyond your children's wellbeing alone. Every time you catch yourself before repeating the sentence that was once said to you, you are not only protecting your child. You are quietly proving something to the child you once were: that the sentence was never a fact about your

family, only a habit and habits, unlike facts, can end with you.

Pause & Reflect

- *Which label from your own childhood did you recognise most strongly in this book?*
- *Who said it, and do you know anything about how they themselves were raised?*
- *What would it mean to be the one who stops that sentence from continuing?*

What Comes Next

Whether you came to this recognition as a parent examining your own speech, or as an adult recognising your own childhood, the next chapter is where both threads meet: what repair actually looks like, in practice, when the wrong was already done.

The Weight of Your Words

Chapter 10: Undoing the Damage

If You Recognised Yourself in Earlier Chapters

If you've read this far and found yourself recognising more than one label from Chapter 4, in your own voice, said to your own child, this chapter was written for you specifically. This is not in anyway to add guilt to what you may already be carrying, but because guilt without a path forward simply sits there, unresolved, and usually ends up doing nothing except making the next hard day more likely to end in the same words again.

There is a path forward. Islam has never treated any wrong a person commits as final or unrepairable, and that includes this one. But the shape of the repair matters, and it's different from what most of us assume repentance looks like.

It may help to hear it as a story rather than a principle first.

A Story Worth Sitting With

There was a man who called his son lazy. He did not once for years, the way a nickname settles into a family without anyone deciding it should. The boy was seven, then eleven, then fifteen, and at every age the same word found him: over an undone chore, a missed prayer, a

school report that wasn't what the father hoped for. The father never raised his hand. He would have said, if asked, that he loved his son fiercely, and he would have been telling the truth. He simply believed the word was accurate, and saying it, in his mind, was closer to honesty than to harm.

The boy grew into exactly what he had been told he was. This was not because it was ever true. His teachers, in the years before the word settled in, had described a curious, quick child but because a child raised inside a verdict eventually stops arguing with it. Why finish an assignment early, when finishing early was never what the label expected of him? Why apply for the opportunity, when the outcome had already been decided by someone whose

opinion mattered more than his own? By the time he was a grown man, he had built an entire adulthood around confirming a sentence someone else had handed him at seven.

Years later, the father, older now, and reading a great deal more than he used to about what the deen actually asks of a parent understood, for the first time, what he had done. He went to his son not with a lecture, and not with the old authority he'd once carried in every conversation between them, but the way Chapter 8 of this book describes: plainly, without qualifying it away, without "I only said it because." He told him he had been wrong. That the word had never been true. That whatever his son had become, it was not what

he had actually seen in him as a boy, and he was sorry it took him this long to say so.

His son was quiet for a long moment. Then he said the sentence his father will carry for the rest of his life, in the opposite direction from the one he once handed down:

"Dad... I stopped trying years ago because I believed you."

There is no clean resolution to end that sentence with. The father cannot return the years his son spent inside a label that was never accurate. What he could do, what this chapter has been arguing the whole way through was refuse to let the wrong remain unaddressed simply because it was old, or because acknowledging it was uncomfortable. The conversation did not undo a childhood. It

opened, for the first time, the possibility of a different one going forward for the son's own understanding of himself, and, just as importantly, for his son's children, who would now grow up around a grandfather who had learned, however late, what his words were capable of.

A Word Before Going Further

If any part of that story felt close to your own household, this is the place to say plainly what the rest of this chapter sometimes leaves implicit. Children are remarkably resilient, and Allah's capacity to repair what years of careless words have done is not smaller than the damage those words caused. Many of the parents reading this chapter have already made

exactly this mistake and the door to putting it right, unlike the years already spent, is still open today. The aim of what follows is not to measure how much damage has been done. It's to show what walking through that door actually looks like.

Why Istighfār Alone Isn't the Full Answer Here

Most of us have grown up understanding tawbah primarily as something between a servant and Allah which is regret, seeking forgiveness, resolving not to return to the sin. That's accurate for sins that stay between you and Allah. But scholars draw a firm distinction for a category of wrong called ḥuqūq al-'ibād which is the rights of other people and speech

that has harmed another person falls squarely into this category.

The Prophet ﷺ made the stakes of this distinction unusually vivid in the hadith of the bankrupt person. He asked his Companions who they thought the truly bankrupt person was. They answered as anyone would someone with no money, no wealth. He told them that in his Ummah, the bankrupt one is a person who arrives on the Day of Judgment with prayer, fasting, and charity intact, but who also insulted this person, slandered that one, and wronged another and so their good deeds are stripped away, portion by portion, and handed to the people they wronged, until nothing is left, and their sins are added to what remains (Muslim). Notice that the deed named first,

before wealth or violence, is insult — the same category this entire book has been examining.

The reason this hadith matters so much for the subject of tawbah is what scholars draw from it. Rights owed to other people are not settled by istighfār and worship alone. They are only fully settled when made right with the person who was wronged, in whatever way that wrong can be made right. Prayer and charity are real and rewarded but they were never designed as a substitute for going to the person you hurt.

What "Returning the Right" Looks Like When the Wrong Was Words

When the harm is financial, the path is obvious, return what was taken. When the harm was a repeated label spoken to your own

child over months or years, there's no single object to hand back. But the principle still applies, translated into the medium the wrong was done in.

This looks like acknowledging directly to the child, not just privately to Allah, that something was said that shouldn't have been, without qualifying it into disappearing ("I only said it because you..."). It looks like naming, out loud, what was actually true instead of the label telling a child labelled "stubborn" for years that you were wrong to call them that, and that what you actually see in them, now that you're looking properly, is something worth naming honestly. And it looks like sustained correction over time, not a single conversation because Chapter 5 established

that a label became belief through repetition, and undoing a belief follows the same mechanism, just aimed in the opposite direction.

Is It Appropriate for a Parent to Apologise to a Child?

Some parents hesitate here, worried that admitting fault to a child undermines the authority and respect a parent is owed. It's worth being direct about this concern, because it keeps a lot of otherwise willing parents from ever having the conversation this chapter is describing.

Nothing in the tradition supports the idea that a parent's authority depends on appearing infallible in front of their children. The

obligation to make right the rights of another person, established in the hadith above, does not carry an exception for parents addressing their own children if anything, a parent modelling accountability teaches a child something a hundred lectures on honesty could not and that is acknowledging a wrong and correcting course is what a person of taqwā actually does, not a sign of weakness. A child who watches a parent say "I was wrong to call you that" learns, first-hand, exactly what tawbah looks like in practice which may end up being some of the most valuable religious education that child receives in their entire upbringing.

Reversal Is Not a New Idea in This Tradition

There's precedent, in a different register, for the idea that something already given or already said can simply be taken back and corrected. When Bashīr gave a gift to one son without matching it for the others, the Prophet ﷺ didn't tell him to simply feel bad about it and move on. He told him plainly to take it back, and set it right. The imbalance wasn't treated as permanent just because it had already happened.

And Chapter 3 already showed the Prophet ﷺ personally renaming people whose names carried a difficult meaning. 'Umar's daughter went from a name meaning "the disobedient one" to one meaning "the beautiful one," a change made well after she'd already been called by the old name for some time. A name

already given, already used, already familiar to everyone corrected anyway, because getting it right mattered more than the discomfort of the correction.

Neither of these examples is about children's labels directly. But the underlying confidence they express is the same one this chapter is asking you to hold onto. Something already said, already repeated, already believed, is not beyond correction. It only requires the same honesty about the wrong that the earlier chapters asked you to have about the words themselves.

Pause & Reflect

- Is there a conversation with your child you've been avoiding because it means admitting you were wrong?

What remains is turning all of this into daily practice. It could be a simple exercise for auditing your own speech going forward, so the awareness these chapters have built doesn't fade the way most good intentions do once ordinary, tiring days resume.

Chapter 11: A Word Log for Parents

Why This Book Ends With a Notebook, Not a Conclusion

This book opened with an observation worth returning to now that we've reached the end. You have probably said something to your child this week that you don't remember saying. That sentence was true on page one, and it will still be true next week, next month, and next year not because you're a careless parent, but because memory for our own speech is naturally unreliable, especially for the words that cost us nothing to say and therefore leave

no mark on us, even while leaving one on the child listening.

Ten chapters of principle, fiqh, and Prophetic example will not, by themselves, change that. Awareness fades within days unless it's given something concrete to attach to. This final chapter is that concrete thing, a simple, practical tool, not a theory, for keeping the weight of Chapter 1's amānah in view on an ordinary Tuesday, not just while reading a book about it.

The Practice

Keep a small notebook, or a note on your phone if that's more realistic for your day. It should be something you can reach in under

thirty seconds, because anything more complicated than that will not survive a real week with real children in it.

Each entry needs only four things:

1. **What was said.** The actual words, as close to verbatim as you can manage not "I was a bit sharp with him. " The actual sentence: "I told him he'd never learn."
2. **What triggered it.** One line. Late for school. Broken plate. Fighting with a sibling. This isn't for self-justification, it's for spotting your own pattern of when the labels come out.
3. **Behaviour or identity?** A single word: was what you said aimed at something the child *did*, or something you told them they *are*? This is the Chapter 2

distinction, applied to your own week instead of to a hadith.

4. What you'd say instead, next time.

This is not vague ("be nicer"), the actual replacement sentence, ready in advance, so it exists in your mind before the next high-pressure moment arrives, not invented in the heat of it.

Why Writing It Down Matters More Than It Sounds Like It Should

There's a reason this book asked you to write rather than simply resolve to "be more mindful" going forward. A private resolution is invisible even to yourself a week later, it competes with every other thought in your head and rarely wins during an actually stressful moment. A written line is external evidence. It exists

whether or not you're feeling motivated when you open the notebook again.

There's also a second, quieter benefit. A written log, reviewed honestly over a month, tends to reveal something most parents don't see in the moment: the labels cluster. They show up overwhelmingly around one time of day, one specific trigger, one particular child, or one recurring context, tiredness after work, hunger before dinner, the presence of a particular relative who sets a short fuse. Chapter 4 explained that the harm comes from repetition, not from any single moment of heat. A word log is simply how you find your own repetition before it finds another year to run in.

A Weekly Habit, Not a Daily Obligation

This isn't meant to become one more thing that induces guilt if missed. A realistic version of this practice is a short weekly review. Let's say five minutes on a Friday evening, or after Jumu'ah, looking back over the week and honestly filling in what you can remember, rather than trying to catch every single moment in real time. Perfection isn't the goal, and a book that spent this many chapters warning against harsh, unforgiving standards for children would be inconsistent to now demand one of yourself.

What matters is that the practice exists at all, consistently, somewhere you'll actually look at it again because Chapter 10 already established that undoing a label requires the same mechanism that built it: repetition, sustained

over time, deliberately aimed in the right direction this time.

Closing Reflection

This book began with a verse describing amānah as something so heavy that the heavens and mountains declined to carry it, and only the human being accepted the weight. It's worth sitting with that image one final time, now that you understand more specifically what that weight looks like inside an ordinary household: not a dramatic burden, but an accumulation of small, forgettable sentences, said across years, that quietly become the story a child tells themselves about who they are.

You were trusted with that story before your child could speak a single word of their own. What you've read in this book doesn't ask you to become a parent who never raises their voice, never runs out of patience, or never makes a mistake. None of that was ever the standard the Sunnah set, as Chapter 6 showed clearly enough. It asks something narrower and more achievable that when you speak about your child, to your child, you remember what you're actually holding, and that you write it down often enough to keep remembering.

One day, the child sitting across from you now will be an adult you no longer get to correct, comfort, or gently guide the way you can today. One day, in a moment you won't be present for a difficult exam, a hard year, a decision made

alone, they will hear a voice in their own mind, deciding for them what they're capable of. That voice will very likely be yours.

Long after you have returned to Allah, your words may still be speaking inside them.

Make sure they are words that help your child walk toward Jannah, not words they spend a lifetime trying to walk away from.

May Allah make us of those who guard well what we were trusted with, and who correct with mercy rather than condemnation for the child in front of us, and for the child we once were.

رَبَّنَا هَبْ لَنَا مِنْ أَزْوَاجِنَا وَذُرِّيَّاتِنَا قُرَّةَ أَعْيُنٍ وَاجْعَلْنَا

لِلْمُتَّقِينَ إِمَامًا

*"Our Lord, grant us from among our spouses
and offspring comfort to our eyes, and make us
leaders for the righteous." (Sūrah al-Furqān,
25:74)*

Appendix: Your Word Log

Photocopy this page, or recreate it in a notebook. Let it one row per entry, filled in weekly.

Date	What was said (as close to exact as you can recall)	What triggered it	Behavior or identity ?	What I'd say instead, next time
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At the end of each month, read back through the "trigger" column before anything else. That column, more than any other, will tell you where to focus first.

Darul Hikmah — Rooted in Knowledge. Relevant to Life.