

Words Matter – Improve Your Communication with your Child

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What you may be doing / saying	Why this may not work for you	Alternative things to say that may be more helpful
<p><i>Empty Praise</i> Great Job / Good girl That's a beautiful picture You're the best _____ in the world!</p>	<p>If you praise everything they do, even easy stuff, praise is meaningless. It can imply you think they've reached the peak of their potential and they don't need to (or can't) get better.</p>	<p>Give specific detailed feedback about what's good, and what could be even better. Focus on the process/HOW they did it, not on the product. Ask questions to help them reflect on what they learned.</p>
<p><i>Giving vague commands</i> Be good. Behave better. Be nice.</p>	<p>Requires them to guess what you want them to do. Saying "be good" implies that they are bad.</p>	<p>Be clear in advance about what the expectations are for good behavior in that context. If issues arise, give very clear, concrete instructions for what they should do.</p>
<p><i>Only telling them what NOT to do</i> Don't throw that / spill that / hit the dog / slam the door</p>	<p>If you just say what not to do, they have to first stop their impulse, <i>then</i> figure out what they can do instead. Both are hard for young kids to do!</p>	<p>Tell them what <i>to do</i>: "Carefully hand that to me. Move your milk so it doesn't spill. Pet the dog softly. Close the door gently."</p>
<p><i>Labelling or shaming</i> You're so [clumsy, stupid, mean] You never [clean, help out, behave] Stop acting like [a baby]</p>	<p>Labelling a child limits them. If you label them based on a problem behavior, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and they continue to be that way.</p>	<p>If you disapprove of a child's behavior, tell them how to change the behavior. Try not to attack their identity or their sense of being worthy of your love. "Everyone can get better at anything if they work at it."</p>
<p><i>Telling them how to do things they already know how to do:</i> Hang your coat up. Wash your hands.</p>	<p>Implies you don't think they're smart. Implies they only need to do those things when you tell them to. Doesn't teach independence.</p>	<p><i>Ask them</i> what they should do: "Where does your coat go? What do you do before we eat? I bet you know what you need to do next." "Does that look right to you?"</p>
<p><i>Doing everything for them</i> You're doing it wrong, let me do it You're too slow, I'll do it</p>	<p>Implies that they'll never be competent. If you rescue them from every challenge, how will they ever learn to do things on their own?</p>	<p>Allow them to be frustrated. Let them make mistakes and learn from them. "You can't do it <i>yet</i> but you'll get there."</p>
<p><i>Dismissing their feelings:</i> Don't cry. You're OK. It's dumb to get upset about that. There's no reason to be scared.</p>	<p>Dismisses their feelings as unimportant. Until the emotion is acknowledged, it may be hard to move past it. Tells them not to trust their intuition and just do things even if they seem risky.</p>	<p>Validate emotions first, <i>then</i> address behavior. "I know you're mad. It's not OK to break things." After you've said "I hear that you're scared / hurt / worried" <i>then</i> you can address logical reasons why you believe that it will be OK in the end</p>
<p><i>Being overcautious:</i> Be careful. Watch out. You may get hurt.</p>	<p>Of course we caution them about really dangerous things. But we don't want to <i>over-use</i> this so they are frightened of everything.</p>	<p>Prepare, don't scare: Model / demo how to be safe. When the risk is just a mild bump or bruise, let them test things. It could be a low-risk learning experience.</p>

Rewrite These Sentences

"Great job! I love the blue sky and those are the prettiest flowers I've ever seen."

"You need to behave well in the restaurant."

"Don't bang your glass on the table when you want more milk."

"Why are you always such a whiny kid?"

"Get your toothbrush and put some toothpaste on it."

"We're running late, just let me put your shoes on."

"Don't cry. Just get back up and do it till you get it right."

"Watch out. Be careful. You could get hurt climbing that."

How do you think your child would respond if you said your new sentences instead of the ones that were written here?

Homework Assignment – bring back to class.

Name: _____

Sometime in the next week, test this out! When you find an opportunity to change your communication from your normal style to trying out a new communication strategy from this handout, then seize the moment and test this out.

(Please set yourself some reminder to try this – like pin this paper to your refrigerator or bulletin board, create a calendar appointment or task, or set an alarm on your phone that you can snooze till you find a good opportunity to try this.)

Then report on your experience....

What did you do? (i.e. what would you have said in the past in this situation, and what *did* you say instead)

What happened as a result of using this new communication strategy?

What did you notice about how it felt?

What happened with your child?

How might this support a relationship with your child?