
To say or not to say: Using better language choices to guide children



If you don't get out of that sandbox now, you'll never get to play in it again!"

We often blurt out words without thinking. Just as in the picture book *Elbert's Bad Word*, the consequences can be immediate, profound, and even laughable. But the effects of our language choices with children can also be long-lasting and value laden.

Haven't you heard someone say something like this to a child?

"If you don't hurry to get in line, you'll have to stay inside."

"You can't have dessert until you eat the foods that are good for you."

"You are such a good girl."

"Why can't you be more like Justin?"

"Why are you being such a baby? There's nothing to be afraid of."

"If you don't listen to me, I'll send you to the office."

"If you're good, I'll give you a treat from the treasure box."

Let's consider these examples and how to avoid using words like these with children.



If you don't hurry to get in line, you'll have to stay in the classroom.

Threats do teach, but they teach the wrong things. They tell children that you don't have the strength or capacity to follow through on your requests and directions. Threats invite children to challenge you—to test your resolve—and they charge the classroom with tension and sometimes anger.

In this case, are you really prepared to leave a child inside? Beyond a disregard for the child's safety and for licensing regulations, these words give the dallying child the upper hand. If you really need to move quickly—for a fire drill, for example—you want children to heed your words immediately. If there is no emergency, consider giving better warning for the transition. Good humor combined with planned transitions can lead to eager compliance.

If a child resists routines, make sure consequences are logical and enforceable. For example, rather than threatening an indoor stay (something children might regard as a reward), consider inviting them to complete their projects outdoors. Or grant in fantasy what you can't grant in reality: "I know you'd really like to stay inside, maybe everyday. But now it's time for our group to be on the playground. Let's go." If necessary, take the child's hand and start moving. Remember, actions are often more powerful than words.

No dessert unless you eat your vegetables and bread.

These words set up an unnecessary and undesirable power struggle. Food should never be used as a reward or punishment. When adults use words like these, they open the door to long-term food battles, obesity, and eating disorders.

Babies will never starve themselves and in most circumstances won't overeat. Build on this by encouraging children to pay attention to their food. Suggest, for example, that children describe how applesauce feels in their mouths, or remind them to

carefully chew and swallow cornbread. Encourage them to identify feelings of full and hungry, and to associate meals with conversation and good will.

Make meal time an opportunity for children to work on independence and decision-making skills. Offer food family-style, and teach children to serve themselves only as much food as they think they will eat. Make sure every part of the meal is healthful and attractive. Avoid sugary treats (children are predisposed to favor them) and serve fruit for dessert, for example.

You are such a good girl.

Labeling children as good or bad presents two problems. First, no person is totally good or bad, pretty or ugly, generous or selfish, or any other adjective. It's the behavior that's good or bad. Learn to separate the child from the child's activity.

Labels present a potential trap. Assume that you turn around and see Jennifer peacefully painting at the easel. What you don't know is that she pushed Ethan against his easel only moments earlier.

Imagine Jennifer's reaction when she hears, "You are such a good girl." She might think "Boy, did I ever put it over on her" or even "If she thinks I'm

good, what's bad?" The result can be confusion, manipulation, and guilt. Children know they can't be good all the time, and they may persist in misbehavior to prove it to you.

A second problem is that labels—especially negative ones like rude, selfish, lazy, and sloppy—pose the danger of the child's accepting your evaluation and incorporating it into self-image. Children need to learn to monitor their own behavior and make their own judgments about their work and projects. The goal is for them to build an inner sense of worth and goodness. When adults make the judgment, the motivation for behavior comes from outside. Children can become dependent on outside judgment and less able to make behavioral decisions independently.

Because our task is to help children build a strong sense of self, we need to make sure our words help them build a realistic picture of their strengths. Focus on their effort: "You took time and care in building that sand fort." These words are more useful and truthful than "What a pretty fort," which focuses on the product.

Likewise, make sure your words are specific. "You arranged the beads in a yellow-blue, yellow-blue pattern" is more specific and informative than "What a nice string of beads you made." Similarly, "I think I can smell that flower you painted" shares your appreciation more powerfully and honestly than "That is the most beautiful painting ever."

Why can't you be more like Justin?

Comparisons pit children against each other. As a result, children see themselves in endless competition for your attention—positive or negative. In some cases, children might feel unable to earn your attention through positive behaviors and will resort to negative ones. Too often children feel negative attention is better than none at all.

Another problem with comparisons is they don't establish behavior standards. What is Justin doing that's desirable? Instead of comparing, clearly describe the behavior you observe and the behavior you expect. For example, say, "I see puddles of paint on the floor. Will you get the damp sponge and wipe the spills, please?" Likewise, recognize successes without comparison. "Thank you for wiping up that mess. Now no one will slip in the orange paint."

The Tone of Voice

It's not so much what you say
As the manner in which you say it.
It's not so much the language you use
As the tone in which you convey it.
"Come here!" I sharply said,
and the child cowered and wept.
"Come here," I said,
and straight to my lap he crept.
Words may be mild and fair
And the tone may pierce like a dart.
Words may be soft as summer air,
But the tone may break a heart.
For words come from the mind
And grow by study and art.
But tone leaps from the inner self
Revealing the state of the heart.
Whether you know it or not,
Whether you are mean or even care,
Gentleness, kindness, love, and hate,
Envy, anger are there.
Keep anger not only out of your words
Keep it out of your voice.

—Anonymous

Why are you being such a baby? There's nothing to be afraid of.

Children need to be able to communicate their feelings—sadness, anger, joy, or fear—with trusted adults and without the risk of ridicule or sarcasm.

Avoid discounting children's feelings. Instead be ready to help children deal with challenging, uncomfortable emotions. Let children know that you understand their feelings and take them seriously. Help children name what they feel. Vocabulary is a powerful tool in managing emotions.

In the case of childhood fears, show that you accept the child's feeling. Ask, for example, "What can we do to help keep the art closet monster away?" Draw up a game plan with the child, and make conquering the fear a team effort.

If you don't listen to me, I'll send you to the office.

Do you really want to undermine your own authority? A child's sense of trust is built on the faith that significant adults can handle any situation with wisdom and justice. Passing off challenging situations to a higher authority erodes your relationship with children and implies that you are less trustworthy in times of conflict.

Choose your battles and make sure the conflict is worth such extreme words. Figure out why classroom interactions sometimes get out of control. What changes could you make in the environment, schedule, routine, or interaction that could change the scene?

Rather than shirking your responsibility, share your feelings of anger and frustration. "I'm so angry

Making better language choices

Use the following examples to practice reworking your words into positive, effective communication.

Negative statement	Positive statement	Your words
Quit tearing up the pages in the book.	Books are for looking and reading. We have old magazines if you'd like to tear something.	
No crawling up the slide.	Our bodies go down the slide—up the steps and down the slide.	
Get off of that chair.	Your feet need to be on the floor.	
Don't eat with your fingers.	Spoons work really well for scooping your pudding.	
Give that back to him. He had it first.	It looks as though we have a problem. What can we do to work this out?	
Don't run.	Running is for outside. Inside we use walking feet.	
Get away from that gate.	My eyes need to see you on the playground. Please come play in this area.	
Don't spill your juice.	Use two hands on your cup.	
Don't take off your shoes.	Keep your shoes on your feet so your feet are safe.	
Don't throw that sand.	Sand stays in the sandbox. I'll get you a ball if you want to practice throwing.	
No yelling.	Your loud voice hurts my ears. I'll remind you to yell when we go outside.	
Don't hurt that hamster.	Hold the hamster on this towel and pet it with your fingertips.	
Settle down!	Let's take a deep breath to quiet our bodies.	

right now I could scream. I'm so angry I can't even talk. I'll take a few minutes to calm down while you work at the easel. Then we'll talk about what happened." Or turn the tables and ask, "How would you solve this problem if you were the teacher?"

If you're a good sleeper, I'll give you a treat from the treasure box.

Bribery—like threats—sets up a no-win situation. If you always attach acceptable behavior to a reward, you may have to continue to buy the preferred behavior.

Frequently, tokens like stickers, treasures, and treats are offered as rewards for acceptable behavior. They are thought to encourage cooperation. In fact, routine rewards become just that—rewards that children expect every time they perform the correct behavior. Hiam Ginott (1965) describes this as the "if-then" fallacy: *If you do (or don't do) this, then you'll get a reward.*

BRIBES SELDOM INSPIRE CONTINUED EFFORT.

Bribes may seem immediately effective—the children did stay quiet on their mats. But bribes seldom inspire continued effort. These words imply you doubt a child's ability to comply with a desired behavior. If you have a doubt, reconsider your expectations. Perhaps your 2-year-olds are too young to stay quiet as long as you expect. If necessary, modify your expectations by changing the activity or environment.

Additionally and unfortunately, the behavior-reward link is challenging to break. What do you do when you run out of stickers or children no longer find the trinkets in the treasure chest acceptable? Rewards are most helpful—and fun—when they are unannounced surprises. Then they represent honest appreciation and recognition of success and achievement (Ginott 1965).

Changing your words

Make your interactions with children more supportive and productive by using these interaction guidelines.

- Identify and validate feelings.
- Seek information through open-ended questions. Avoid yes-no questions.

- Talk with children—not at them.
- Speak with children at their eye level.
- Use children's names.
- Model social skills like not interrupting, offering assistance, and saying "please" and "thank you."
- Support cooperative problem solving.
- Use encouragement and descriptive reinforcement.
- State rules and directives in a positive way. See examples in the box on page 20.
- Offer choices, and respect the choices that children make.
- Warmly acknowledge children's arrival.
- Talk with children about what is of interest to them, with a balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated conversations.
- Give every child positive attention throughout the day.
- Admit your mistakes. Model acceptable ways to respond to mistakes and accidents.
- Demonstrate appropriate affection for children through smiles, nods, and hugs.
- Show that you enjoy and appreciate children and want to share in their discoveries and milestones.

Check your language and behavior choices. Build constructive relationships with children and other adults by avoiding these destructive behaviors:

- a harsh tone of voice;
- yelling and shouting for attention;
- communicating with only commands and directives;
- walking away from a child who is speaking;
- minimizing children's feelings;
- ignoring children and brushing them off;
- being unavailable and inattentive. Examples are standing with your back to the children, talking with other teachers at the doorway, sitting at a desk, doing heavy cleaning, talking on the phone, or balancing your checkbook.
- looking as though children irritate or annoy you;
- shaming children;
- using classroom rules inconsistently;
- showing favorites among the children;
- ignoring children at meal times.

References

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- Ginott, Hiam G. 1965. *Between Parent and Child*. New York: MacMillan.
- Wood, Audrey and Don Wood. 1988. *Elbert's Bad Word*. San Diego: Harcourt Children's Books.