



How to Use Positive Language to Support Your Child's Behaviour

“Stop it.” “No.” “Don’t do that!” As a parent you might find yourself using these phrases when your child begins to make their own choices. What if, rather than telling your child what they can’t do, you chose words to tell them what they can do? This shift in language might seem small, but it can powerfully change the tone of the conversation. When you use positive language with your child, you will likely find that they communicate with challenging behaviours less often.



Unlike adults, young children aren’t yet able to make the connection that when they’re told not to do something, what they should do is the opposite. “Don’t climb on the counter” can be vague to a child. However, “Please keep your feet on the floor” tells the child exactly what the expectation is and how they can change what they’re doing. Using positive language also empowers a child to make an appropriate choice on their own, which can boost their self-esteem. When your directions specifically state exactly what to do and when, it is easier for your child to understand, and they’re more likely to cooperate with the request.

Suggestions for Families

Replace “don’t” with “do.” If you see your child cutting the leaves off a plant, rather than saying “Don’t cut that!” you could say, “Scissors are for cutting paper or play dough. Which one do you want to cut?” It is more likely that your child will make an appropriate choice when you help them understand exactly what options are available. Also, when you provide your child with a choice of things that they can do, they are more likely to select one because it makes them feel like they are in control. This strategy also works for you as a parent because you approve of either choice.

Tell your child “when.” When your child asks for something, instead of saying no, acknowledge their wish and tell them when they can do it. This answer feels more like a “yes” to a child. For example, if your child asks to go to the park and you are working on the computer, you could say, “The park is a great idea! I need to finish this letter for work right now; we can go after lunch.” Another way to positively tell a child when they can do something is with a “first-then” statement. For example, if they want to watch TV but you need them to pick up their toys, you could say, “First, pick up your toys, and then we can watch T.V.”

Give your child time to think. You may feel frustrated when your child does not respond quickly to requests and feel tempted to use demands or raise your voice. Remember that your child is still learning language and how to use it. They need time to think about what you said and how to respond. It can take them several seconds, or even minutes, longer than you to process the information. When you stay calm and patiently repeat the statement again, you will see more positive behaviour.

Sometimes your child may need you to help them remember what you asked them to do in order to do it. Positive acknowledgement and prompts can be useful in these situations. For example, imagine you have asked your child to put on their coat and shoes to go outside, and they come to you without their shoes on, trying to go out. You can say, “I see you have your coat on. What else do you need to put on, before you can go outside?” Stating the information as a simple fact or question, rather than a command, gives your child the information they need to support their independence and problem solving without blaming them or making them feel like they have failed.

Suggestions for Educators

Educators can use positive language at school to help children gain confidence and independence. When educators tell children what they can do, they are able to follow routines independently and positively engage in interactions with others. For example, a child throwing sand on the playground can be shown that, instead, they can use a shovel to put the sand in a bucket. The educator might say, “I see you like sand. Let’s find a bucket for you to fill. Would you like the blue bucket or the red one?” In this way, the educator honors the child’s interest but directs it to a more appropriate play choice.

The Bottom Line

Positive relationships with parents, educators and other caregivers provide the foundation for success. These relationships are the building blocks for your child’s self-esteem and ability to empathize and predict future positive relationships. How we talk about and respond to children’s behaviour has a significant impact on their well-being and social and emotional development. Making positive changes to your communication style can be hard work, but with a little practice, you will see a big difference in your relationship with your child. Your child will feel more encouraged, positive and independent and, as a result, you will enjoy a stronger connection.

