How to Use Positive Language to Improve Your Child’s Behavior

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“Stop it.” “No.” “Don’t do that!” As a parent, you might find yourself using these words and phrases more often when your child begins to make his own choices. Now, stop for a moment and consider how the conversation might feel if you couldn’t use these words? What if, rather than telling your child what he can’t do, you instead chose words to tell him what he can do? While this shift in language might seem small, it actually provides a powerful positive change to the tone of the conversation. When you focus on using positive language with your child, you will likely find that he has fewer tantrums, whines less and overall experiences fewer challenging behaviors.

How can such a small change make such a big difference? While it is obvious to adults, young children are not able to make the logical connection that when they are told not to do something, what they actually should do is the opposite. For example, the directions, “Don’t climb on the counter” can be very confusing to a child. However, “Please keep your feet on the floor” tells the child exactly what the expectation is and how he can change what he is doing. Using positive language also empowers a child to make an appropriate choice on his own, which can boost his self-esteem. When you are specific in your directions by telling your child exactly what he can do and when, it is easier for him to comply and he is more likely to cooperate with the request.

Try This at Home

- Replace “don’t” with “do”. Tell your child what she can do! If you saw her cutting the leaves of 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 her to understand exactly what appropriate options are available.

- Offer a choice. When you provide your child with a choice of things that he can do, wear or go, he is more likely to select one of the options you have offered because it makes him feel like he is 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 to do something, rather than saying no, acknowledge her wish and tell her when she might be able to do it. This answer feels more like a “yes” to a child. For example, if your child asks to go to the park, but you are on the computer finishing up a work project, you could say, “The park sounds like a great idea! I need to finish this letter for work right now. Would you like to go after your nap today or tomorrow morning after breakfast?”

- Use “first-then” language. Another way to tell a child when he can do something in a positive way is to use a “first-then” statement. For example, if he wants to watch TV but you would like for him to pick up his toys, you could say “First, pick up your toys and then you may watch a TV show.”

Practice at School

Teachers use positive language at school to help children become more confident and independent. When teachers tell children what they can do, children begin to manage themselves, classroom routines and interactions with peers by themselves. For example, a child who is throwing sand on the playground can be shown that, instead, she can use a shovel to put the sand in a bucket. The teacher might say, “If you want to play with the sand, you can fill this bucket. Would you like a blue bucket or this red one?” In this way, the teacher honors the child’s interest, but directs it to a more appropriate play choice.

The Bottom Line

Positive relationships with parents, teachers and other caregivers provide the foundation for a successful and happy child, are the building blocks for your child’s self-esteem and ability to empathize and predict future positive behavior choices. The manner in which you talk to your child has a significant impact on his behavior. 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 better overall cooperation.

More Information

More information and resources on this and other topics are available on our website, ChallengingBehavior.org.