

Did You Know?

USING YOUR WORDS

HOW TO TALK SO CHILDREN WILL LEARN

Young children can be easily confused the meaning of our words. We use thousands of them. Sometimes we use too many. Adults have a much more sophisticated understanding of the world than children do. Adults can think *abstractly*, while children are still very *literal* and concrete in their thinking. Just think about these typical adult comments a child might hear: “*Did you get up on the wrong side of the bed?*” “*Now I really have problems. My computer crashed!*” “*How sad. She lost the baby.*” Imagine how puzzled children (who think literally) might be.

Early childhood teacher and author, Carol Garhart Mooney, has written a guide called, *Use Your Words* (c. 2005), which is designed to help adults support children’s cognitive development by using language more thoughtfully. Below are some of her suggestions for making the most of every opportunity you have with your child.

BASIC GUIDELINES for TALKING with CHILDREN

- **Make sure you have the child’s attention before you begin to speak.** This is easier if you are close to the child and down on her level. A gentle hand on her arm can help, depending on the child or situation.
- **Always get down to a child’s level when talking to her.** Squat down or grab a low stool or chair.
- **Remember that body language, tone of voice, and facial expression affect the message you deliver.** The same phrase can be reassuring or threatening, depending on how you say it. Words matter, but your expression and tone of voice matter just as much—and sometimes more—than the words you use.
- **Use simple words and short sentences.** Try to say what you mean as clearly as possible. Avoid idioms and shortcuts. If you do use them, watch your child for signs of confusion and be prepared to explain what you mean.
- **Don’t ask a question or offer a choice when there isn’t one.** Let your child know clearly what you need from him. Avoid using “*Okay?*” at the end of your directions. Don’t say, for example, “*It’s time to clean up, okay?*” because you are not asking permission or giving a choice.
- **Don’t ask questions to which you already know the answer.** Don’t ask your child “*Is that the way we treat our friends?*” What is your purpose asking this? Managing behavior? Instructing? You already know that pushing another child is not a good way to treat a friend. But a young child doesn’t necessarily know that yet. There are better ways to develop your child’s thinking skills.
- **Don’t be wishy-washy.** If you mean “no,” say it. If you say “no,” mean it!
- **If you must interrupt your child, remember he deserves the same courtesy adults expect.** Say something like, “*I need you to come and help me here now, please.*” or “*In five minutes, we are going to be cleaning up.*” Teach *Please, Thank you, I’m sorry, You’re welcome* and other niceties by your own modeling, rather than prodding your child with sarcasm or irritation (“*What did you say?*”).

Young children need CLEAR EXPLANATIONS.

Watch out for these phrases...

Be polite.
Quiet down.
Be kind.
Be careful.
Be safe.

They may not teach your child exactly what to do.

TRY THIS INSTEAD...

- *Food needs to stay in the kitchen.*
- *Sit with your bottom on the chair.*
- *Put all the green blocks back in the red basket.*
- *Keep your feet on the ground.*
- *Tell Sam you don’t like it when he pushes you.*
- *Ask Michael to move away from you.*
- *Toys that get thrown go into the Time-out Box for a day.*

GIVING DIRECTIONS: Be Brief and Specific

One of the primary skills preschoolers need to learn is to follow directions. Clarity is so important with young children. Try to offer simple one-step directions. Advance from there as your child shows that he is able to follow through.

Be as specific as you can. “*Sit nicely*” or “*Be nice*” are vague concepts for young children. They need more concrete directions to fully understand such as, “*Please sit on your bottom so that your brother and sister can see the pictures, too.*”

Preschoolers need lots of time, along with many experiences, and even some direct instruction, to internalize what an abstract word like “nice” or “good” means.



“Sit on your bottom and keep your hands in your lap.”

When you give your child the clear directions he needs, your words simply *start* the process.

You will probably have to repeat your instructions several times before your child is able to really grasp a concept.

And then he may need lots more practice to really get it

PROVIDING INSTRUCTION: Give Words and Lend Support (Be a Coach!)

Parents have the important job of helping their young children learn how to be in relationships with the people around them. One way we can help is by giving children instruction and practice in saying what they need and want. We can also teach them how to solve problems.

Often we tell children to “use your words.” This is a very important skill, but for many young preschoolers, it doesn’t give them enough specific information to solve their problems. They don’t yet know which words to use or what to do if their words don’t work. They haven’t yet had enough experience with relationships. They still need more coaching.

Children may know (in theory, anyway) that pushing “isn’t the way we treat our friends,” but they may not know what else to do. It’s our job to teach them. They need tools for managing their day-to-day interactions with others.

A more helpful response to seeing one child pushing another might be to say:

“*Tell Lori she is in your way. Ask her to please move.*”

“*Tell Tommy that you don’t like it when he pushes you. Ask him what he wants.*”

Comments like these give both children the chance to use their words to tell the other how they feel, plus it gives them the specific words to use. Children need to be taught how to get what they need and given lots of practice before we expect them to “get it right.”

GUIDELINES for PROVIDING INSTRUCTIONS & DIRECTIONS

Be clear and specific.

Be concrete.

Be direct. Say exactly what you expect.

Use statements—not questions—when you expect children to comply. Don’t give a choice when there isn’t one.

Make directions and instructions simple. Start with one step at a time.

Give children specific words to use in a conflict.

Give children lots of practice and support in solving conflicts.

If children don’t comply right away, assume they don’t understand. Rephrase and try again.

If children don’t still don’t comply, follow through with action.

ASKING QUESTIONS: Be Straightforward

Young children can become confused, and even resentful, when we use unclear language or try to manipulate them with our words.

Think about how many times we ask a question that implies a choice, but there really isn’t one:

“*Would like to clean that up?*”

“*How about sharing that with your brother now?*”

In each of these cases, the adult is expecting the child to do what the adult wants, but not making it clear. You can lower your child’s frustration by not asking questions that imply a choice when there isn’t one.

ACCEPT YOUR AUTHORITY: Be Confident and Take Action

Many parents are full of ambivalence. They want to be effective and help children learn positive strategies for interacting, but they

don’t want to take charge. Mooney believes many adults today think “being authoritative and direct is somehow being authoritarian.” Sadly, children are left confused when we do not provide the adult directives they need. It is our responsibility to say things clearly and then follow through with appropriate action. Give it a try!

TELL WHAT TO DO

“*Stop!*”

(what needs to be done)

“*You’re hurting Diego.*”

(why it needs to be done)

“*Tell him you’re still using the shovel.*”

(give the alternative to grabbing/hitting and the words to use, as well)

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“You’re hurting Diego.”
(why it needs to be done)
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