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Stay Positive: How the Words We Choose Shape Behavior

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Challenging behaviors are a typical part of childhood development. When these behaviors arise, it is easy to fall into the pattern of telling children what not to do. However, with positive language, caregivers and teachers can create opportunities for children to be successful by telling them what they should do instead. Providing concrete examples of home and classroom expectations makes it easier for children to learn how to behave accordingly. Positive language can be used to nip behavior in the bud or as redirection in response to misbehavior.



Here are commonly used statements for redirecting behavior reframed from negative to positive language:



Negative Language:

Positive Language:

- "Stop touching that." ••••• ➔ "Quiet hands."
- "Don't say that; that's rude." ••••• ➔ "Next time you feel that way, you can say _____. That would be polite."
- "Don't stay at the sink for too long," or "Don't rush through washing your hands." ••••• ➔ "While you wash your hands, sing 'Happy Birthday.' When the song is finished, then you are finished washing your hands."
- "Don't rush through your homework." ••••• ➔ "I am setting a timer for 10 minutes. Try as hard as you can for 10 minutes. When that is all done, you can take a break."
- "Don't interrupt me." ••••• ➔ "Remember to wait for your turn to speak. I know you have something to say, and I want to hear it. Let me speak with your brother, and then it will be your turn."

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(cont.)

Here are some tips for using positive language:

- Take a deep breath and choose words thoughtfully. Challenging behaviors are frustrating. Taking a moment to compose emotions before addressing the child could be the difference between saying something constructive and saying something damaging.
- Use a firm but calm tone.
- Avoid using the word “don’t.”
- State the expected behavior and give the child a chance to make a positive choice on his/her own.
- Name examples of what the expected behavior looks like (“Remember that we are walking in the hallway.”)
- Acknowledge the child when they demonstrate the expected behavior (“Hey, I heard you say “please” when you asked your brother for the iPad. Nice job!”).
- Sometimes, a child will choose to continue misbehaving after redirection. Let the child know the consequence for misbehavior and still offer an opportunity take a positive route (“If you choose not to start cleaning your room, there will be no time for the iPad. However, if you start now, you will have plenty of free time.”) Make sure to follow through with the consequence, whether it is positive or negative.



Although positive language can be used in most situations, negative vocabulary may still be required, especially if a child is in immediate danger or a situation must be resolved quickly. However, take a moment after the incident is over to address the behavior calmly and talk about possible solutions and expected behavior. Alyssa Nucaro from edutopia.org suggests the one-and-three rule: For every one negative statement in the classroom, there should be three positive statements.

Changing communication styles takes time and practice, but word choice makes all the difference when addressing behavior. Try positive language today for a happier home and classroom!



Resources:

Nucaro, Alyssa. “Positive Words Go a Long Way.” Edutopia. October 02, 2017. Accessed September 28, 2018. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/positivewords-go-long-way>

Temple, Mike. “Language of Choice.” Supportive Behaviour Management. 2018. Accessed September 28, 2018. <http://supportivebehaviourmanagement.weebly.com/language-of-choice.html>

“Want Positive Behavior? Use Positive Language.” Responsive Classroom®. April 10, 2012. Accessed September 28, 2018. <https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/want-positive-behavior-use-positive-language/>

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