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The Power of Teacher Language

An adapted excerpt from *The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn*

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As the children come back from lunch, they are slow to quiet down. Calmly, the teacher rings a chime, a well-rehearsed signal for attention. She waits a moment until the last child is settled, quiet, and looking at her, then says in a conversational voice, "I see that everyone is ready for math. Let's get started." The children's focus shifts and the lesson begins.

A few simple words guided the children to a place where they could learn at their best.



Teacher language—what we say to students and how we say it—is one of the most powerful teaching tools. Through careful use of language, we can support students as they develop self-control, build their sense of community, and gain academic skills and knowledge. The *Responsive Classroom*® approach offers specific language strategies for various areas of teaching. These strategies range from asking open-ended questions that

stretch children's thinking to using respectful reminding and redirecting language when children's behavior goes off track.

Underlying all of these strategies are five general guidelines.

Be direct and authentic

When we say what we mean and use a kind and straightforward tone, children learn that they can trust us. They feel respected and safe, which helps them develop self-discipline and take the risks that are necessary for learning.

Many of us slip into using indirect language as a way to win compliance from children. For example, as a new teacher, I tried to get children to do what I wanted by pointing out what I liked about other children's behavior. "I like the way May and Justine are paying

attention,” I would cheerfully announce while impatiently eyeing Dave and Marta fooling around in the corner.

When this strategy worked, it was because the children mimicked the desired behavior in order to win praise from me. But my language did nothing to help them develop self-control. Moreover, this kind of language can be damaging to children’s relationships. By holding May and Justine up as positive examples, I’m implying that the other children are less commendable. This can drive a wedge between the children.

Later in my career I learned to speak directly. To Dave and Marta in the example above, I’d say, “It’s time to listen.” To call the children to a meeting, I rang a chime to gain their attention, then said firmly and calmly, “Come to the meeting rug and take a seat.” The change in behavior was remarkable.

Sarcasm, another form of indirect language, is also common in the classroom. “John, what part of ‘Put your phone away’ don’t you understand?” a teacher asks. The students laugh, and the teacher thinks she has shown that she has a sense of humor. But she has embarrassed John and diminished his trust in her. And even though the other students laughed, they too might feel less trusting of the teacher, no longer seeing her as a protector but as someone who has the potential to use words in a hurtful way. It would be more effective for the teacher to directly state, “John, put your phone away.” If he doesn’t respond, then it’s time to try another strategy, such as the use of logical consequences.

Convey faith in children’s abilities and intentions

Our language shapes how children see themselves and their world. When our words and tone convey faith in children’s desire and ability to do well, the children are more likely to live up to our expectations of them.

“When everyone is ready, I’ll show how to plant the seeds.” “You can look at the chart to remind yourself of our ideas for good story writing.” “Show me how you will follow the rules in the hall.” These words, said calmly, in an even voice, communicate a belief that children want to and know how to listen, cooperate, and do good work. The students then come to see themselves as respectful listeners, cooperative people, and competent workers, and are more likely to behave accordingly.



And when they do behave positively, it’s important to take the time to notice and comment on it, naming the specific behavior. “You finished cleanup in less than five minutes today!” or “You’re trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence,” a teacher says warmly

without gushing. Such observations tell students why we have confidence in them and provide hard evidence that they should believe in themselves. When children believe in themselves, they are more likely to work hard at learning and to enjoy the process. Our language plays a central role in helping children develop this critical self-confidence.

Focus on action

Because children tend to be concrete thinkers, it can be effective to name specific actions rather than abstract terms. For example, rather than telling children to “be respectful,” it’s usually more helpful to tell them exactly what to do: “When someone is speaking during a discussion, it’s time to listen. That means eyes on the speaker and hands in laps.”

Sometimes it’s effective to prompt students to name the concrete behaviors themselves. To a student who has trouble focusing during writing time, I say matter-of-factly, “What will help you think of good ideas for your story and concentrate on writing them down?” The student might then respond, “I can look at our ideas chart” or “I can find a quiet place to write, away from my friends.”

I am not advocating that we always avoid using abstract terms such as “respectful” and “responsible.” However, when we do use these terms, it’s important to associate the words with concrete actions. Classroom expectations such as “treat each other with respect” and “be a responsible learner” will be most meaningful to children if we help them picture and practice what those expectations look like in different situations.

Focusing on action also means naming the desired behavior rather than saying something about the child’s character or attitude when we want a student to change. For example, frustration can lead us to chide a student who chronically does poor work. “I don’t think you even care!” we might state. This does nothing to help the student change. In fact, these words can reinforce the child’s negative sense of himself and lead to defensiveness and resentment.

It’s more helpful in such situations to issue a positive challenge that names the behavior we want: “Today let’s see if you can concentrate on your project for ten minutes. What would help you do that?” or “Your job today is to record five observations of our crickets. Think about what you’ll need to do before you start.” The focus is now on what the student can do. It shows him how he can work at his best.

Keep it brief

It’s difficult for children to follow long strings of words. “When you go out to recess today, be sure to remember what we said about including everyone in games, because yesterday some kids had an issue with not being included in kickball and four square, and we’ve talked about this ...”

By the time we finish talking, many of the students are thinking about other things. Few have followed the entire explanation.

Children understand more when we speak less. “Who can tell us one way to include everyone at recess?” The children now have an opportunity to remind themselves of the positive behaviors. If the expectations for recess have been adequately taught and practiced, children will be able to make good use of such a reminder.

Know when to be silent

The skillful use of silence can be just as powerful as the skillful use of words. Silence allows children to think, rehearse what to say, and sometimes to gather the courage to speak at all.

We can see the benefit of silence if, after asking a question, we pause for three to five seconds before taking responses from students. Three to five seconds can feel



uncomfortably long at first. But if we stick to it—and model thoughtful pausing by waiting a few seconds ourselves to respond to students’ comments—we’ll set a pace for the entire classroom that will soon feel natural. The whole class will then be rewarded with classroom conversations of higher quality.

Being silent also allows us to listen to students. Listening means resisting the impulse to jump in and correct students’ words or to finish students’ thoughts. To listen is to maintain our attention until the speaker is clearly done and to try to understand what the speaker said before formulating a response.

When we listen to students like this, we model respectful interaction in a community of learners. When we allow students to speak at their own pace, we help them learn because speaking is an important means of consolidating knowledge.

Opening the doors of possibility

Incorporating these five principles of teacher language into our daily communication with students helps us build a classroom where students feel safe, respected, and engaged. By paying attention to our language and using it to open the doors of possibility for children, we help them become successful learners.

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