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

“Stop it.” “No!” “Don’t do that!” As a parent, you might find yourself using these words and phrases more often when your child does something you don’t like or makes an inappropriate choice. Now, stop for a moment and consider how the conversation might come to an end if you didn’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 connections that we often do. They are not told not to do something, what they are supposed to do. Language is key when you help her to understand the leaves of a plant, rather than tell her what she can’t do by telling your child what not to do. Using positive language is doing exactly what he can do. Please make sure you phrase your directions by telling your child what he can do, rather than telling him what he can’t do. Using positive language helps him to focus on what he can do, rather than what he can’t do. It helps him to understand the expectation is “First, put your shoes on before you can go outside.” Stating the information as a simple fact, rather than a command, gives him the information he needs to make the right choice on his own without blaming him or making him feel like he has failed.

Offer a choice. When you provide your child with a choice of things that he can do, or can’t do, 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 works with your child 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 needs to watch TV but you would like him to pick up his toys, you could say, “First, pick up your toys and then you may watch a TV show.”

Give your child time to think. Sometimes, you may feel frustrated when your child does not respond quickly to requests and feel tempted to use demands and raise your voice. When that happens, remember that your child is learning language and how to use it. She needs time to think about what you said and how she is going to respond. This may take several seconds, or even minutes, longer than you to process the information. If you remain calm and patiently repeat the statement again, you will see fewer challenging behaviors and enjoy a more positive quality time with your child.

Help your child to remember. Children are easily distracted. Sometimes your child may need you to help him remember what you asked him to do in order to do it. “I remember” statements are very useful in these situations. For example, imagine you have asked your child to put on his shoes so that he can go outside, and he comes over to you, barefoot. You think he is not trying to go outside. You can say, “I remember you need to put your shoes on before you can’t go outside.” Stating the information as a simple fact, rather than a command, gives him the information he needs to make the right choice on his own without blaming him or making him feel like he has failed.

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, they 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 choice, but directs it to a more appropriate play choice.

The Bottom Line

Positive relationships with parents, teacher 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 and the words you use can have a significant impact on his behavior. Making positive changes to your communiqué can make a difference in the 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.

Try This at Home

Replace “don’t” with “do.” Tell your child what she can do! If you saw her cutting the leaves off of a tree you would say, 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.

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Climate Masters offers 10-week Course Teaches Ways to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint

Climate Masters of Nebraska, a program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s School of Natural Resources, will offer its next 10-week course Thursday evenings from February 11 to April 22. The next series will be 6–8:30 p.m. in Hardin Hall on UNL’s East Campus. Throughout the course, participants will be asked not only to save energy, renewable energy, and water, but also to save money, protect the environment and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

To open to ages 18 and up. Funding provided by the Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality. As part of the course, participants are asked to share the knowledge they have gained by volunteering 30 hours within six months of the start of the course.

Classes will focus on the basics of climate change, home energy, renewable energy, carbon footprint and communicating climate change, consumption and waste, local, home, water conserva- tion and yard and my current carbon footprint. The next class begins March 25.

Classes are limited, so register by Jan. 8. More information and registration form, go to http://climatedmasters.unl.edu or call 402-472-2712.

Extension’s Guardian/Conservator Trainings

The trainings in Lancaster County are co-taught by Extension’s Guardian/Conservator Trainings monthly in Lancaster County and quarterly in other local judicial districts except Douglas County (which are taught by Volunteer Assisting Seniors). These trainings help fulfill Guardian/Conservator education requirements set by the Nebraska Probate Code.

State appointed guardians manage finances, submit reports to the court and provide other vital roles which impact wards.

Extension’s training prepares guardians to better serve their wards and fulfill the legal responsibilities to the court.

Most trainings are co-taught by a volunteer attorney through the Nebraska State Bar Association who answers general legal questions.

The trainings in Lancaster County are co-taught by Extension’s Guardian/Conservator Trainings and are scheduled for the following Tuesdays:

- Jan. 13, 1:30–4:30 p.m.
- Feb. 17, 5:30–8:30 p.m.
- March 10, 1:30–4:30 p.m.
- April 14, 5:30–8:30 p.m.
- May 12, 1:30–4:30 p.m.
- June 23, 1:30–4:30 p.m.
- July 14, 1:30–4:30 p.m.
- Aug. 11, 5:30–8:30 p.m.
- Sept. 8, 1:30–4:30 p.m.
- Oct. 6, 5:30–8:30 p.m.
- Nov. 13, 1:30–4:30 p.m.
- Dec. 8, 1:30–4:30 p.m.

For a list of other trainings statewide, go to http://extension.unl.edu/guardians or $15 per individual (no charge for additional family member short materials).

To register, please call the local contact person at least two days ahead of training date. In Lancaster County register with the receptionist at 402-444-7180. More than 150 guardians and/or conserva- tors caring for vulnerable children and adults have benefited since the mandated program started in 2005. Approximately 350 guardians participate annually in Lancaster County.

ATTORNEY CHIASSON says, “My clients have indicated this class is an invaluable resource.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Nebraska Extension has seven NeGBuGeads about Guardianship (in English and Spanish), which are available at the Extension office or online at http://extension.unl.edu/ guardianship.