

Our Words Matter

When considering caring for and educating young children, we prepare by gathering appropriate materials to suit children's individual needs. We prepare, painstakingly, our environments to add wonderful play areas, developmentally appropriate materials, inviting elements of beauty, and all we can think of to best support children's learning, discovery, and safety. We read and research child development and all its related components. We work diligently trying to provide the best for children. But have we forgotten something? What about something as simple as our words? Do our words and conversations get the same consideration as our other preparations?

The Power of Words

Our words play a powerful part in what we do, how we care for and educate young children. Think about how often we speak with the children.



We provide great amounts of conversation, direction, and response to children's actions, questions, work, and behavior.

If we think about what truly has an effect on children, it is our words. What do children hear when we speak? How do they interpret what we say? Where do our words lead children? Why do we say certain things? Do our words hold true meanings or empty messages? Are the words we speak for our benefit or to benefit the child?

We often do safety checks to our environments and materials, and also check to see if they match developmental need, hold children's interest, extend and motivate thought. Shouldn't we do the same with our words? Shouldn't our words support child development? Shouldn't our words hold children's interest? And shouldn't our words extend and motivate thought?

All of these questions can be answered if we truly think before we speak. Allow yourself time to reflect about what to say, how to say it, or if even to say it at all.

Are Our Words Empty?

As providers, we use our skills to observe children to assess their developmental abilities, discover their interests, and see how they learn. Try taking time to reverse the observation and reflect upon our own abilities, responses, and actions. Some early educators find great value in tape recording their conversations and even videotaping themselves.

What do we say to children? A lot of our words hold praise. Praise can be wonderful when it is genuine and reflects actions for children to ponder. Some educators believe praise motivates children to get more praise instead of motivating children toward positive behaviors.

When we see great play happening, our first response to children might be, "Great job!" This actually says very little to children and focuses on the praise, not what they have actually done. Try, instead, stating what you saw. "Sharon, I saw you share your truck with Peter. It looks like you two are having a lot of fun! I saw you drive your trucks to the sand box. Where will they drive next?" This response acknowledges their actions but doesn't offer an empty reward. The reward is the children enjoying their play!

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Remember to Ask

When we ask children questions, we find out a lot of information as well as guide them to contemplate their choices and actions. For example, Jon just painted a creative, bright, beauti-

ful painting. We could say, "Beautiful painting, Jon!" or instead, we could find out Jon's ideas. "What do you like about your painting, Jon? What was the first thing

you painted? How did you mix your colors? Did you want to add anything else? What should we do with your painting?" These questions lead the child to expressing his ideas.



Background Noise

How many times have we chuckled over children repeating "mixed-up" adult phrases? We know our words are engaging to young children and that children are intelligent and observant. Therefore, we need to consider our "background conversations" with co-workers and parents, to make sure they are appropriate. Children can hear us, even though they may be fully engaged in play. Our conversation should be considerate and appropriate for the children to hear.

Words to Guide

Instead of just telling children a correct answer, our words can guide children toward self-discovery and wonderful revelations. For example, when exploring color, we could tell children that blue and yellow makes green. Better yet, we can guide children to discover this phenomenon by saying something such as, "What might happen if you put a drop of blue in your water? Now what if you add a drop of yellow? What is happening?"

Learning through experiences and self-discovery carries great impact, far more than being simply told the answer.

We also guide behavior and choice with our words. Instead of simply telling children what to do or how to act, our words can gently guide children to make positive choices.

We see two children fighting over the same book. We can simply tell them to stop and decide who gets the book first or we can guide with our words. "It looks like you two have a problem. What can we do? How can we fix this? What are you going to do? Is that okay with your friend?"

What children gain from thinking of their own ideas and choices is

far more valuable than if we simply tell them the answer or tell them what to do. The children become the problem solvers and carry the power and skills to make good choices.

Our words really do matter. Think of how we are affected by what people say to us. By carefully choosing our words, we can lead children into their own discoveries and meaningful experiences.

Our words and our pauses are welcoming invitations for children to think, make choices, and discover what wonderful ideas they have.

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