



Using Our Words

STATEMENT

What you're about to read is strictly a point of view. Since I am not a parent I can only offer an opinion and those should be offered only when requested. So I'll share with you some of what my friends and I have come to understand as we practice gymnastics together. Although we talk about tucks and knees up, our focus is on feeling safe, respected, and successful and developing a strong sense of ourselves while having fun. It seems fitting to talk about the words we speak and their power to improve or weaken, scare or secure, build or break down our relationships with each other. Grown-ups often remind children to "use their words." On behalf of the children who explained things to me verbally and non-verbally, I'd like to spend some time exploring how grown-ups can make their words useful.

NUMBER ONE: BE EXCEPTIONALLY CONSISTENT

Recently while I was teaching and trying to remind everyone about all the things we don't want to forget, 2-year old Gina stood on my lap and bit my shoulder. I explained to her that biting was not allowed and asked her to please not bite Elliott. I was clear, to the point, and polite. Well, she bit me again, this time with a declaration of love. I was surprised. This behavior is not typical for girls, or for Gina. After class I talked to Gina's mom about how Gina had changed her way of communicating with me. After some thought mom connected the biting with a new game at home; when dad returns home from work he says he loves Gina so much he could eat her up and then pretends to take bites. So Gina was simply expressing her love for me as her father does for her. It happens all the time. Normal use of language for us can be inconsistent and confusing for children.

Here are some examples:

Rule:	Confusing Exception:	To avoid confusion, use:
No hitting	Hit the ball	Swing at the ball
No Pushing	Push the Truck	Scoot the truck
No Biting	Take a big bite	Eat it up
No Yelling	Stop yelling (usually loudly)	Gentle Voice (please don't yell)

I try to avoid confusion by saying everything first inside my head, hearing how it sounds, and then making sure it's what I wanted them to hear. Sometimes I even ask them to repeat it back. I try to hold myself to the same standards of consistency that children do. It's not easy, but it's worth it. I find that children begin to feel afraid when they're confused. Clarity and consistency (from their perspective, not ours) can go a long way to help them feel safe and in control.

NUMBER TWO: MEAN EXACTLY WHAT YOU SAY

Children are excellent decision makers. If they know they can change an answer by throwing a tantrum, they'll throw a tantrum. When children experience inconsistency in what their parents say and in what really happens; they stop believing. It's in the process of believing someone's words that we start to believe in them and believing in your parents is



SPECIAL NOTE:

Children under 3.5 years of age see the world in absolute terms. Exceptions do not apply. In fact, young children are the most consistent people I know. If something works for them, they'll do it over and over again. From toys to tantrums, if it gets results they'll do it again. Adults aren't nearly so consistent. For us, context changes everything.



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where trust is born.

We often give children choices and then take those choices away because in our eyes they're making the wrong choice. The choices we give children should be viable choices: two right choices rather than one right choice and one wrong choice. It's important to accept that the choice a child makes may not be the one we would have made, but it wasn't our choice to make. If we give them a choice, we should follow through by respecting their decision.

Sometimes kids will knowingly choose a discouraged alternative for ulterior motives. Recently I explained to little Sam that if he could not sit down by my count of three he would not be allowed to take his turn on the trampoline. Because Sam was unable to voice his fears about the trampoline he chose not to sit down and lost his turn. Sam's mom, who was watching, intervened on Sam's behalf to recover his turn on the trampoline. Unknowingly, this mother cut her son's safety net and forced him to either jump or act out more. Sam was left feeling frustrated and powerless. Not only did mom rescind a promised consequence, but she failed to respect Sam's decision.

It's difficult to mean what we say all the time. As adults we are well-trained to use words to evoke emotions, change opinions, and create images. We say things with no intention of doing them. Luckily, there's an escape hatch when something we said isn't working, or isn't fair, or was said out of frustration. There are times when the world demands more from us than we can give, but children don't automatically adjust their needs when that happens. We have to ask them to adjust.

For example, sometimes I come into class after a stressful meeting and all the kids are calling my name. Out of frustration I announce that the next person to say my name gets a time out. NOT FAIR! Do I follow through? What about being consistent? Well, I find that if I simply explain that I was frustrated and made a mistake and ask them to please excuse me, they will. Not only have we relieved the pressure on me, but we have opened the door for them to make mistakes and fix them, too. This also exposes them to unconditional love: I'm not perfect and I don't expect you to be either.

NUMBER THREE: SPEAK FOR YOURSELF NOT FOR YOUR CHILD

A child's development is marked by the events they accomplished alone: they turn over by themselves, crawl by themselves, walk by themselves, eat by themselves, dress by themselves--the list goes on. Most parents praise and encourage these acts of independence, but stop short when it comes to letting children speak for themselves.

When I meet a new student for the first time, I address only the child, not the parent. I can count on one hand the number of times the parents did NOT answer for the child.

Elliott: "Well, you're a very big boy, are you six?"

Child: "... um ..."

Parent: "No! No! He's just big for his age. He's three!" and so on.

Not only do I not get to start a relationship with the child, but his identity is formed and presented completely by his parents.

Names and colors are easy. Feelings are another story. One of the most difficult challenges we face as grown-ups is getting our children to identify and express their feelings. Although we know we can't do it for them, we too often try. "Say you're sorry!" is one example I hear a lot. They may be guilty, but they're not necessarily sorry. In our program we ask children to say "excuse me" to acknowledge their violation of a boundaries, but we don't tell them how to feel about it.

Adults also tend to phrase their own desires in terms of their child's needs. For example, "You need to comb your hair" rather than "Please comb your hair" or "I'd like for you to comb your hair." This seems like a minor distinction, but it's an important one. Blurring the boundary between what parents want and what children need makes it hard for kids to identify and satisfy their own needs for themselves. Many of us spend much of our lives trying to separate our needs from those of our parent's. Expressing ourselves carefully can cut that time considerably for our children and allow them to develop a strong sense of themselves early in life.

Why are our words so important? Words mean power. Power is the wrapping paper for gifts like respect, love, protection and trust. When grown-ups make consistent use of words they help their children feel in control and emotionally safe. When grown-ups mean what they say and follow through on their words, they give children respect by allowing them to participate in what happens and when. When grown-ups let children speak for themselves, they empower them to define themselves and be responsible for who they are.

Our investment in communicating with well chosen words, listening to their words, and responding to their needs, is important for the foundation you'll build upon later when bedtime becomes getting home on time and a 2-minute time out becomes losing car privileges on the weekend. In formative years we establish trust, respect, and how we'll relate to each other when our kids become teenagers.

This foundation will be tested over and over with consequence and cemented with consistency, follow through, and responsibility.

Right now the price is low. As our children grow older, the price gets higher.

As a final note, I would like to emphasize that building a channel of communication with children begins with simplicity. Choose your words from a small vocabulary. A recent study indicated that on average young children hear only the first three words in a sequence. Given our goals of consistency and clarity, meeting a three-word limit presents quite a challenge. Then again, the information we want to make sure we give young children can be consistently and clearly stated in just three words: I love you.