



Social & Emotional Development / Emotional Development

How Your Words Can Affect Your Children



Dear Elizabeth,

I often hear my sister saying negative things about her 3-year-old like “he’s a little brat.” I tell her he’s listening but she says he’s too young to understand. Is this true?

– **Javier Messineo**

Queens, NY

Elizabeth's Tips



Elizabeth Sanchez

Host

- Be aware of the impact your words have on children
- Avoid labeling your child
- Include children in the conversation

Expert Advice



Dr. Charles Sophy

Child psychiatrist

The Power of Words on Children

When our letter writer talks about his sister calling her child “a little brat,” it’s important to remember that children are never too young to understand. As long as the child has ears and can hear, the child understands what that means. It’s not just the word – it’s the tone in your voice and your facial expression which give meaning to the words. It’s also your body language – the whole picture – that sends a negative message. Adults need be aware of the power of the words they choose. Whether you want it to send that message or not is really what a good, solid parent or caregiver has to think about.

Strength-Based Speaking

Strength-based speaking is a way to speak to your child or really anybody from a good standpoint. You start with a solid, positive reinforced phrase. For instance, “You look nice today. What made you choose a red blouse?” I may not like that red blouse, and I’m trying to figure it out, but I want to start off our conversation in a way that’s going to make you feel like I’m with you, you’re with me, I respect you, but I have a question.

Don’t Label Children

Even words that don’t have a negative connotation – such as “You’re the smart one” – can have an adverse effect on children. It’s a lot of pressure that may be put on a child that is inadvertently too much for them, but they still strive to live up to that label, because every child, remember, at the end of the day, wants to make their parent happy

and love them and accept them and do what's right, believe it or not. When you pick out one attribute, such as, "You're pretty," or "You're the smart one," you also derail your child from thinking of themselves of other possibilities. So even though these comments may be a good strength-based comment, there are a whole other array of things you can say to your child that are all strength-based.

Positive Reinforcement without Labeling

It's important to remember positive reinforcement, tones of voice, smiles on your face, open body language, strength-based speaking. You don't have to include adjectives which might put a negative spin on a situation. "How was your day?" doesn't mean, "I heard you had a rough day." You can simply ask, "How was your day?" Let them tell you how their day was. Maybe they have a different perspective. It's all about respect and self-esteem and positive, strength-based speaking.

"You Never Listen!"

When a child hears a parent say to him, "You never listen" -- "never" is a pretty strong word. Are you sure you mean never, because to a child who's a concrete thinker, "never" means "You never listen." That's not strength-based. There are other ways to say that. Try saying, "Talk to me. What's going on?" So that they know that there's some give in that space and that you're connecting.

"Stop Being Such a Baby!"

First of all, we're talking about small children, so it's OK to be a baby if you are a baby, so they need permission to be themselves. You're sending a message that you're judging them and you don't like their behavior, and you give them no room again. They feel harsh, so there are better ways to say that. Reconnect with your child by saying, "We'll talk about it." But give them a space to get themselves together. Respect them for that, and say, "Come get me when you're ready."

"Why are you so clumsy?"

That sends such a terrible message. It's like, "You can't walk. You can't do anything right." Obviously as a parent, you're upset about something. Your child may have dropped something or may have tripped over something. But there's a way to help your child. Remember, your child doesn't have as developed a neurological muscular system as an adult would have, so be patient and approach it in a different way. You might say, "It's hard to walk with your cup and not spill, and that's OK, honey."

"Stop doing that!"

Your child is going to be a child. They're going to want to touch the stove. They're going to head towards a candle. They're going to go towards an electrical outlet. So it's important for you to have a dialogue with your child that "no" means "no," and "yes" means "yes," so that when you're worried because they're going toward it, you can have a word or a phrase that catches you so that you're not judging them by saying, "Stop doing that." It's startling to hear those kinds of things. You want to be able to say, "Johnny, remember no, I don't want you to touch." Try to say it in a non-threatening, non-reverberating way to them. You do have to raise your tone if they're getting closer and it's getting more unsafe, but you just have to really be mindful of what you're saying and how you are saying it.

Overall, parents need to understand what is going on inside of them. They may have had a rough day themselves. They may be irritated. So get yourself in check before you start to dialogue with your child. It'll make it a lot easier and a lot smoother.

Child Care Provider Comments



Michelle Kimbrough
Mother of two

I try to avoid using labels and yet I want to reinforce good behavior, so I will say, "good job" or "excellent work." I never say that my son is "good" or "awesome." I keep my comments situational. If he does something good, I will compliment him in regards to the situation. He has trouble with homework sometimes, so I will praise him by saying, "You're trying so hard." I compliment his work -- not his intellect.



Silvia Fischer
Grandmother of 20-month-old

I make it a point to avoid labeling my grandson because of how I was labeled as a child with my own parents and family members. My grandson is smart, but I want him to know that he has many wonderful qualities. From firsthand experience, it was hard for me when my parents called my sister Mary "the smart one" and I had "the pretty face," but it felt like I didn't have much else to offer because my older sister was the one everyone said was "so smart."

In Hispanic families, it's common to pick out your child's best attribute and highlight it, but over time, that can become harmful. As you grow up, you get your self-worth from that label. My youngest sister was always called "Gordita" which means little fat one. It's supposed to be a term of endearment, but as she got older, she thought in our parents' eyes that she would always be the "fat" one – that it was her role in our family. Because of all of this I try to be very sensitive to my grandson or my nieces and nephews and make sure that they're not given a label.



Tom Bliss
Child care provider for 5 years

When I first started working at a child care 25 years ago, children were introduced to me as, "This is our troublemaker, keep an eye on him" and "This is our bed-wetter," but I didn't feel it was fair to the children and it was a generalization that I knew was wrong. So I avoid certain tones, and I had to realize that this is a momentary behavior and not a categorization of the child.

When talking with the kids in my care, I use specific instances instead of generalizations. I avoid the words "never" and "always" as in, "He never behaves well," or "She always cries." Keep things at an observational level and avoid evaluating the child. Plus, the tone that you use when speaking to or about a child is very important.

When I hear a parent using labels, I try to explain to a parent why it's not a good idea to use labels. Instead of telling children, "You're so smart," parents might want to try saying, "I'm proud of you for figuring this out."

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