

Week 5. Navigating the “IT”: INTERFACE WITH THE WORLD ~ My Roles as a Parent

HANDOUT: Shaping language because language shapes us ~ examples



- > Replacing assumption with inquiry
- > Replacing habit with conscious choice
- > Putting conscious choice to action

Words open up “doorways” in a child’s world/consciousness to concepts, experiences, and interpretations of life. Language both expresses and shapes how we think.

As we introduce language to our children, we have an opportunity to bring consciousness to our use of words and phrases, and to:

- look at whether they are useful, accurate, and age-appropriate,
- allow our “highest and best” to inform which words we use, rather than our habits, our lower self, or simply our unconscious assumptions. Asking ourselves: “Would Buddha or Christ or any other Awakened Being we may know of and be inspired by, make sense of the world in this way?” can be very helpful in gaining insight into more evolved responses and interpretations, and
- enable our children to experience life themselves firsthand (as long as safe for them and others) – and then offer the most accurate, life-affirming ways to help them describe the experience, rather than coloring it ahead of time with our own interpretation and bias.

Which words, concepts and related modeling do we suggest avoiding, and why?

- Ones that color life experience with **negativity** – for example: hate, anger/angry, fighting, freaked out, stupid, terrible, strange, lonely.
- **Culturally overused ones with inaccurate associations** – scary, bad; monster...
- Ones that express a **low energy-level in a victimized way**: lazy, boring/boredom
- Ones that **label a person**, instead of their behavior – “He’s stupid”, “She’s careless”

Overall: We co-create a respectful space that encourages integrity and empowerment, and is free of violence, negativity, and fear. Here are some examples of choices we made for early childhood, with reasons as to why we avoid them, as well as suggestions on what words we would use instead or how we might reframe:

“I hate”: This very strong expression of dislike is unlikely to be necessary or accurate in a child’s world. It creates a strong distance between oneself and the life experience, and does not allow for a way out. It can also be very hurtful when used in relation to a person. “Hate” can easily be replaced by “I don’t like” or “I don’t enjoy so much”, with a clear explanation as to why, that can lead to a creative solution and insight.

“Are you angry?”: Similar to “hate” this is generally an overly strong expression for a young child’s emotions and could be more accurately be expressed: “Are you frustrated?” or “Are you upset about something?” or “Are you struggling with something?”

“Stop fighting” OR “They’re fighting”: We believe the word “fighting” is overused and holds associations of aggression, battle, intense conflict – and would, for example, replace it with: “Let’s see if we can find a solution, it looks like you are having a struggle.”

“I am freaked out”: We choose a more empowered and accurate ways to describe our circumstances without unnecessary intensity and drama, which could also make a child feel insecure.

“I’m stressed”: Similar to just above – what are we modelling for how to be in the world? We can be more accurate, for example, “I am feeling unsure” or “I need to take a break and rest for a moment” or “Let’s stop for a while and take some quiet time together” or “I haven’t been listening to myself, and have gotten myself too busy”.

“I am sooo tired”: Provides an example of lack of energy, of feeling like a victim. Instead we could model taking responsibility for ourselves and being creative >> “I didn’t sleep enough last night, so I will go to bed earlier tonight”, “Let’s find something restful and fun to do together – what about reading books with a nice cup of tea?”

“He is stupid/crazy”: This labels and judges, and is quite likely inaccurate. Instead of labelling a person, we find ways to describe and understand a person’s behavior that encourages compassion and constructive insight, for example: “He is making an unhealthy choice” or “She does not seem grounded”.

“What a terrible day that was!”: This is a narrow, negative and probably inaccurate interpretation of a day. What does “terrible” really mean? When we think about that, we would probably only use this descriptive on very rare occasions.

Also, this can be a very subjective interpretation of certain events and may not reflect a child's, while colouring the child's experience. Instead we could say: "Today there were a few challenging moments for me" Or "I found ... to be quite a tricky situation" And continue to explore what we could learn from that and do differently next time.

"Are you lonely?": Instead of introducing the concept of loneliness (and with it most likely the idea that this is something to be avoided), we can simply speak of "being alone" or "with company", and that both have their benefits and challenges. So, for example, "Would you like some company?" or "We could think of some fun ideas on what you could do when you have some alone time."

"Yuck, that's awful!": A subjective, negative and not necessarily accurate way of responding to something. Also, it doesn't leave any space for inquiry or change. It models a reactive, repulsed way of responding to an experience. And it potentially closes the door for a child to experience it differently, perhaps positively. Suggested alternatives: "Oh, that is different; it is very spicy / moldy / gooey / loud (or whatever factual, objective adjective would fit)."

"What a weird (or strange) guy": Negative labelling that distances and encourages an "us" versus "them" mentality. Instead we would reframe: "He is acting in an unusual (or "ungrounded") way. OR "He does not look very happy" OR "I wonder why he dresses like that; do you have an idea?" And then brainstorm together to gain further insight and understanding.

"That's so scary!" OR "Did that scare you?": Overused and usually inaccurate, and potentially scattering a subtle sense of fear in children's minds and hearts? Instead we can offer them more accurate words to describe how they might be feeling that are not directly associated with fear, and that can lead to resolution, for example: "Are you feeling unsure?" (Then, "Let's help you feel sure again") or "Did that startle (or "surprise") you? Or, "Did that make you feel nervous?"

"Stop being so lazy!": Puts into self-sense an idea of being lazy. Instead: "Try and find a way to use your energy better" or "Let me help you find a way to use your energy more fully."

"Are you bored?" OR "That's boring!": Is this perspective worth introducing? Who says life is ever boring? It doesn't need to be seen in this way, so we can choose not to introduce this concept in the first place.

"Night night, don't let the bed bugs bite!": Said as a friendly habit, but at a young age can be taken literally by children and introduces the idea of something being present in the night that could get them. From about age 5-6 it can be understood as a fun saying, before that it can instigate unnecessary worry and fears in your child.

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"Is there a monster hiding behind the curtain?": Said in play, but could open up the idea of a "being" that is big, possibly invoking fear and bringing uncertainty. Depends on age and sensitivity of child.

"I'm so jealous...": Introduces a way of perceiving the world that is based on a lack of (love, stuff...). No need to provide this as an example, especially if child has not yet had an experience that could be named jealousy. If child has had such an emotion, then it could be expressed in a way that encourages choice and change, for example "You wish you had the same ... as she does?" Well, perhaps you can take a turn playing with it once; let's go ask." And we can have a conversation with our children about what jealousy really is... for example, "A fear that there is not enough love to go around" followed by reflection on whether that is actually true or not, and what to do when we do feel this way.

In summary: We stay light on negatives (behavior, language etc.) – encouraging a positive, constructive, accurate, empowered outlook on and experience of life in a child. We focus on and model an inspired, open-minded, proactive (rather than reactive) relationship to life. We liberally edit books and other teaching materials to reflect this. As our children grow older, we discuss and explain the choices we make, as well as (around 8 yrs. old) how the freedom to use words goes hand in hand with a responsibility to utilize them wisely.

Invitation: To engage in a co-creative exploration of looking at language with new eyes, of bringing awareness and creativity to the project, reclaiming both freedom and responsibility in your quest to introduce your child to an evolving culture that makes more sense than the one you have known so far. To have fun with this awareness-raising practice!