

Some Things to Keep in Mind When Talking to Children

The most important thing to remember when talking with children is that they are people. Regardless of developmental stage, children have personal feelings, thoughts and ideas about the world. Their world is constantly and rapidly expanding in their earliest years and is heavily influenced by the adults in their lives. The words and tones we use with children, concerning even the most mundane routines, are powerful models in their most impressionable years.

Children respond best to messages presented in the positive. When we phrase a message negatively, the last words children hear are the very thing we want them to stop doing. How much more powerful for them to hear that they *may* do – to have an acceptable alternative. And much more likely that it will happen. “You may walk in this space” rather than “Don’t run.” “Please use a quieter voice” instead of “Stop screaming!” “Now it’s time to eat your lunch” rather than “Stop fooling around.” It can be challenging to think positively when we are exasperated by a behavior. But it gets easier when we remember to say what it is that we want them to do, and practice helps.

Of course our alternatives are not always acceptable to a child, which can lead to some discussion. Many times children present their own acceptable solutions. In other scenarios we need to actively take responsibility to keep things safe and friendly.

Children also find it useful when the adults in their lives establish themselves as consistent. The old cliché “Say what you mean and mean what you say” has merit. Within the first six months of life humans learn in whose words they can trust and with whom they can play games. There are many occasions for flexibility and choice, but ultimately the grownups are responsible for creating a safe and secure environment for children. When we say that we are leaving after this kiss, we can be expected to go. When we say that cleanup time is in four minutes, we mean that we will be cleaning up four minutes from now. There is security in predictability.

By toddlerhood children are able to appreciate simple, concise explanations of verbal requests. If we tell a child to “Please wait to jump until the mat is clear,” we can follow up with “I want you to be safe.” Even when we don’t verbalize a reason for the directive, we can mentally self-check the validity of the request. Is there a good and fair reason for asking this of the child? Or are we feeling grumpy because we didn’t sleep well last night? It is useful to periodically ask these questions of ourselves, to recognize our own issues that we may bring to a situation.

When “no” is not a choice, we should avoid any confusion by presenting it as such. Asking a child, “Do you want to put on your coat?” when we are expecting him or her to put on a coat, is a set-up for potential conflict. How much easier for adult and child when our expectations are made clear. At the same time, we can make ourselves available to help should our assistance be requested.

Children do not benefit from condescension. In fact, they are savvy enough to hear it as patronizing and disrespectful. We don’t need to sound simplistic or syrupy. A developmentally appropriate message delivered respectfully is a meaningful message. The same respectful language and tone of voice we would use with our peers is also appreciated by children. They know that we take them seriously, that we are treating them like the unique individuals they are. While we have expectations of them, we are keeping their best interests at heart. Ultimately, with thoughtful, positive guidance from the adults in their lives, children come to understand that they are safe, cared for, and respected.