



Effective Language to Use with Children

Encouraging Appropriate Behavior

The goal in Montessori education is to develop children who have internal discipline (a child who is patient enough to weigh their options and think about the consequences of their decisions).

Children need to learn how to make the right choices themselves, free from external control (the adult). Therefore, the adults model appropriate behavior and allow children the freedom to learn from their own mistakes. Consequences should never be a punishment; rather, each moment should be a learning opportunity for the child. Children best learn appropriate behavior through natural and logical consequences.

The following are some guidelines for encouraging appropriate behavior:

When to Intervene:

It is not always necessary to intervene. If you see misbehavior, do the following BEFORE intervening:

1. Make sure that the child is not engaged in purposeful activity—this should NEVER be interrupted. For example, your child is peeling an egg incorrectly, let your child make a mess, then show your child how you would do it.
2. Observe for a few moments to get a clear picture of what is happening—never jump to conclusions about a situation (a child who is climbing on the kitchen counter may be trying to get a glass of water) You can ask your child to say “Help please” next time or put the items on a low shelf.
3. Think about how you are going to address the situation before intervening. For example, “You need to clean up this mess before having breakfast” this process could potentially take up half the morning, do you have enough time to wait?
4. Decide if the behavior needs to be addressed right away or can be modelled with a grace and courtesy lesson later
5. Never enter into a power struggle. For example, “Its time for a shower” your child’s response is “No.” You may redirect their attention to something positive instead, “Which book would you like to read before bed today? Ok, you may go shower first, then we can read the book.”
6. Always intervene if a child is harming another or exhibiting destructive behavior

How to Intervene:

1. Observe and think about how you will address the situation. Do you have the patience to follow through? Could you repeat this every time it occurs? For example, you may change the routine at home. Your child refuses to shower, therefore they will need to shower first before having dinner from now on. Do you have enough time every evening to wait for your child to shower? Can you repeat this everyday until the new routine is established?

2. Quietly approach your child—never yell. Hysterical adults lead to hysterical children.
3. Most of the time, you can redirect a child without having to address the misbehavior. For example, your 2-year-old is picking all the flowers off the bush, redirect their attention by asking him/her to help you sweep the garden, tidy up the shoes, etc. At the age of 3, your child is picking the flowers again, ask your child to put the flower back on the bush. They come to the realization that it is not possible to replace the flower once it has been picked. This is a natural/logical consequence.
4. Children need the freedom to resolve conflicts in their own time—if you force a child to deal with an issue when he/she is not ready, it will result in a power struggle. For example, a 2-year-old does not understand why you are asking him/her to put the flower back on the bush. A 3-year-old will.
5. Resolve any issues as quickly and with as little adult intervention as possible. Ask your child, “Do you want me to help you or do you want to do it by yourself?”

Following Through:

1. If you choose to intervene, you MUST follow-through
2. Without following-through, you have abandoned him/her in a tense situation
3. Remember that each interaction with your child is a learning opportunity for your child
4. Never tell a child that you expect something of him/her unless you are willing to follow through. You will need to be patient and make sure that the expectation is met
5. Following through does not necessarily mean you need to stick around and watch your child as a hawk—sometimes it is best to give the child the freedom to make the right choice on his/her own schedule and observe from a distance. For example, “Please take off your clothes so you can shower” the answer is “No” follow through with, “I will prepare dinner while you get ready for shower, when you are ready, I will come to help you.” If your child refuses, it is ok for you and your family to start eating and finish eating. Your child needs to understand that you and your family have their own needs and there are certain expectations you have of your child. Your child may eat alone that day and for as many days it may take.

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Have reasonable expectations and use incentives to avoid power struggles

- “We can eat breakfast after you take off your pajamas and put school clothes on.”
- “I can’t wait for you to clean up the mess. Come find me when you are done and we can read a book together.”

Give expectations using positive language

Negative language such as “no” or “don’t” invites a power struggle; instead, use language to describe what you want the child to do.

- “Please be gentle with our plants” instead of “Don’t pull off those leaves.”
- “You may...” instead of “you have to...”
- “I don’t like it” instead of “No”

Explain the expectation

It is easy to mistake a child's lack of cooperation for misbehavior when it can often be a simple misunderstanding of the expectation.

- "It is important to brush your teeth every day to keep them healthy and strong. Bacteria that stay in your mouth will hurt"

Be willing to compromise

Model graciousness by being willing to listen to your child, compromise, and collaborate to reach a common goal.

- "I would be happy to help you put away your train set. How about I put away the tracks while you put away the cars?"
- "I understand that you don't want to wear pants to school. Would you like me or your teacher to help you with it?"

State the expectations as a fact

Stating rules as a general fact of life can help you to avoid a power struggle.

- "Glasses are not for throwing it is for drinking. You may throw this ball outside"
- "Crayons are for coloring on paper, not the walls."

Use "I" instead of "You" statements

Giving direct orders can set the stage for a power struggle. Instead, use I statements to define your parental role.

- "I can't let you hit your brother"
- "I don't like it when you do that"
- "I can't let you eat donuts before dinner"

Offer a real choice

Giving children a choice between two acceptable outcomes gives them a sense of power.

- "Would you like to brush your teeth or take a shower first today?"

Avoid: "Can you put your pants on?" If your child says "No" you will need to respect that decision. Instead ask, "Would you like the blue pants or the red pants?"

Redirect the behavior to an acceptable outlet

Observe your child to see what exactly he is interested in doing then redirect him to a more appropriate activity.

- "I can see that you want to dump out water. Why don't you help me water the plants"

Describe your own feelings

Help children recognize that their behaviors can affect others by describing your own needs and feelings.

- “I feel sad that we didn’t get to go on a walk after dinner tonight. Tomorrow I hope we can clean up more quickly so we have time”

Define the positive behavior

It is more effective to highlight a child’s positive behavior than it is to attempt to correct negative behavior.

- “I noticed how carefully you were playing with your sister.”
- “You put away your dishes without me asking you! That is what I call being responsible.”
- “I can see that your body is calm. Now I am ready to read you a story.”

The power of nonverbal communication

It can be more effective to gently rest a hand on their arm when they are hitting than to say anything. Similarly, a smile of approval or serious look can hold a lot of weight.

Help children make amends instead of saying “sorry”

Forcing a child to say “Sorry” sends the unintentional message that they can right any behavior by simply saying “sorry”. There are many opportunities for making amends that involve a more genuine show of concern: asking “Are you ok” or getting someone an ice pack, telling them you won’t do that again, giving someone space, giving someone a hug. It is also appropriate to model an apology.

- “I am so sorry that you got pushed—I bet that really hurts!”
- “Ouch! Did that hurt? Are you ok?”

Take ownership of your own mistakes

Children learn best by watching us! When you are willing to take ownership for losing your temper, not listening, interrupting, etc. your child learns that it is normal to make mistakes.

- “I am sorry that I used such a big voice. Next time I will try to remember to give you more time to put on your shoes by yourself.”

Choose Your Battles

Some battles just aren’t worth it. Remember that there are very few things you can force a child to do, and be willing to let things go. Often natural consequences are more meaningful (a hungry child who threw his food on the floor, wet pants from a child who didn’t want to sit on the toilet).

Self-Regulation vs. External Control

Parents often see their children as a reflection of themselves, and as such can be frustrated or embarrassed by their negative behaviors. This can lead to the desire to control behaviors instead of welcoming the opportunity to model and teach self-regulation. External measures controlled by the adult such as sticker charts, bribes, rewards or punitive measures work in the short term but do not give the child the opportunity to build any skills for handling similar situations in the future. Although it can be initially more difficult, when we invest the time to communicate with our children we will reap the rewards many times over.