

Watch your words

INTENTIONAL TEACHING THROUGH OUR LANGUAGE

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The way we talk to children can influence perceptions they form of themselves – but do we really have a firm grasp on the importance of language and how we should be talking with our children? In this article **Lisa Burman** highlights the need to consider our language and intentional teaching when communicating with children as it has a profound ability to empower strong, self-directed, resilient learners.

One of the most powerful, if not THE most important, tools we have as educators is our language. The words we choose, the tone we use and our non-verbal gestures convey strong messages to children, families and colleagues. Language has the power to build up – or to take down. Our words reveal our values, beliefs and philosophy about learning and our image of the child.

Take a moment to imagine the following scene:

A group of children and their educators are at their local National Park, enjoying their regular Bush Kindy day. Children are engaged playing and exploring in various ways. Several are collecting branches to build their cubby. Others are persisting with tying some branches together with twine as an educator holds them in place for them. One pair have found a quiet place under a tree where they are mixing potions. Five children and an educator are gathered around some fallen logs, using the magnifying glasses to observe the ants busy at work.

Suddenly, the cubby builders explode with noise, arguing about how they should build the cubby. They run through the group of potion-makers and ant-researchers with their sticks in the air.

Educator A responds: "That group, get back to work on your cubbies! This isn't a time for running around."

Educator B: "When you're loud and running around like that, it stops the other groups from learning and I find it hard to hear the children I'm listening to here."

Educator C: "What's the problem here? I've seen you collaborate on cubby-building before. So what's happening this time? What can you do to solve it?"

[adapted from Peter Johnston 2004, Choice Words]

Each of these responses conveys different beliefs about learning.

Educator A's response conveys a feeling that learning is a chore and the children are doing a task. It also reveals





an idea that the teacher is the “boss” and an image of the child who needs to be controlled. The educator might be feeling threatened by the loud and boisterous arguing of the children, feeling like s/he has, or may soon, lose control of the situation.

Educator B’s response speaks more about a belief that learning happens in a social context, where the rights of others are respected. The words communicate to children that they have a responsibility to others.

Educator C’s words reveal an image of the competent child who can collaborate and solve their own social problems. “I’ve seen you collaborate before,” communicates a belief in their ability to think and act. They can be trusted. They have the skills and intelligence. The words say, “I know you can do this.”

INTENTIONAL TEACHING

So what words can we intentionally choose when working alongside children as they engage with and explore nature?

We can start by asking ourselves, “What kind of learning culture do we want to create?” I encourage you to make the time to journal and/or discuss this and the following questions. This would make a great agenda for a team/staff meeting:

- How do we want children to see themselves as learners in nature?
- How do we want children to see and feel about nature?
- What do we want them to believe about learning?
- What do we believe makes a strong, competent learner?

RESILIENT, SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS

One of the reasons many educators feel connected to nature play and to nature-based learning and exploration is that they know it empowers children to be strong, self-directed, resilient learners. The words we use go a long way in creating this. It’s not enough to provide children with a natural environment like the bush, a digging pit, a climbing tree or a beach. Intentional teaching is required to support children to build a view of themselves as self-directed,

interdependent learners. This is what learner-agency is about.

Intentionally using the language of agency means we do not rescue children from their struggles. When they can’t zip up their rain-suit or the roof of their cubby continues to collapse, what do you say? A response such as “Let me help you with that,” might come from thoughtful intentions and offer a quick way out of the struggle, but it will not support the child to develop a strategy to use the next time they encounter a struggle.

When we say, “Try this…” or, “You need to put a lighter roof on your cubby,” we only rescue children from the struggle that is essential for learning. We’re actually taking away the gift that an authentic and purposeful struggle is to building strong learning dispositions and a sense of achievement.

When we want to communicate a belief in the capacity of the child to be an active problem-solver and help them understand the importance of persistence and flexible thinking when learning, we are wiser to use words such as:

“I can see you’re a bit stuck. What are you going to try next?”

“You look like you’re a bit stuck. Can you see a (strong branch/big stone/what might help) close by?”

“What could you do about that, do you think?”

“What have you tried already? Why do you think that didn’t work?”

“I can see you’re not giving up on that. You’re persisting and trying different ways to figure it out.”

“You’ll get there! I can see you’re not giving up.”

PRAISE VERSUS ENCOURAGEMENT

Everyone likes a bit of praise. It makes us feel good. It’s just that it’s not all that helpful in creating the kind of learning culture we’re interested in. At its worst, praise can create a dependency, like any reward system. Children can become dependent on getting praise from the adult. They begin to see value in their learning only when it has been validated by an adult and not for any intrinsic satisfaction it might bring.

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More of...

Tell me about this!

You look happy/proud/
excited. It feels good to...
(swing/climb the tree ...)

Hmmm...and smile

You did it!

What did you learn
from this?

I can see that you...

You look proud. Are you?

When you keep trying new
things, it gives you ideas
about what you like to do.

How did you do that?

How did you come up
with that idea?

I noticed that...

Hmmm...I wonder what
you'll come up with next?

What was the hardest/
easiest part?

Would you show me/
Jessie (another child)
how you did/made that?

Less of...

Great job!

WOW! That's beautiful

Well done!

I love it when you...

I like your...



I can tell a lot about a learning culture when I visit a learning setting, whether it be a Primary classroom, the mud patch in a child-care centre or a Bush Kindy. If children frequently seek the adult's praise with questions such as, "Do you like my potion/painting/pattern?" it tells me that they are used to being validated with some version of, "Yes! I love it" or, "Yes! It's beautiful", no matter the effort that has been applied. These children seem to create their learning only for the teacher to give it a big virtual tick of approval. And they waste time that could be spent engaged in exploration by seeking the adult's approval.

We need to be careful to not create a culture of learning where children believe they need to show the adult everything for it to be worthy. No one sets out to create this kind of culture: it happens by accident, really. Instead, our words and actions need to intentionally show children that the endeavour of learning is satisfying in itself – struggles and all. The strong learning culture envelops children in ways of being that make their own evaluation and satisfaction important. So the next time a child shows you something they have achieved or created, instead of praising it with, "I love it!" or, "Well done!", try one of the suggestions opposite.

BRAVE LEARNERS

Another reason many of us love learning in nature is that it gives children opportunities to stretch themselves physically as well as intellectually. They can climb, scramble, crawl, tie, place, jump, balance and roll – all in authentic and engaging contexts. This also means that sometimes the physical risk is scary for them – and sometimes it is scary for us.

I remember watching my niece climb higher and higher up a tree that was unfamiliar to her. My internal conversation went something like this: "Will she be okay? Yes, I think she'll know when to stop. But what if she doesn't? Should I step in? Am I over-reacting? If I step in will I stop her agency? I think she's got it – it will be okay." It was so difficult to know what I should do!

So what words could we use in this situation (or others where we feel a little nervous about the safety of the children)? One of the first things we think of is, "Be careful!" But that's

probably not the best choice. "Be careful!" doesn't support the child to build self-awareness. If they always hear these words, the danger is they'll begin to monitor their decisions only when given this cue. We want children to be constantly aware and self-monitoring their actions and decisions when involved in something that challenges them. A frightening statistic comes from a study in *The Journal of Pediatric Psychology* (O'Neal, Plumert, Peterson, 2016): parents are "four times more likely to tell girls than boys to be more careful". I wonder if we unconsciously do this as educators too? Are we also unconsciously using a "language of fear" that may stop them from trying challenging physical pursuits outside their comfort zone in the future?

Here are some other suggestions:

"Stay focused on what you're doing. You're doing well."

"I can see you're taking your time and not rushing."

"Do you feel...stable/secure/safe/strong on that...rock/branch?"

"How are you feeling?"

"I noticed how safely you picked up the saw, so I know you'll be using it safely too."

"Sticks need space. Look around you. Do you have enough space to swing that big stick?"

"Ask him if he's still having fun."

"Check in with your friends to see if that's okay with them."

BUT SOMETIMES, THE BEST WORDS TO USE ARE SILENT.

Often our words are beneficial to a child's learning processes, but sometimes they just interrupt the child's focus and concentration. We stop their flow by speaking when it isn't necessary. So sometimes, just practise saying the words in your head. They'll reinforce your intentional teaching AND they won't steal from the child's moment. 🌿

REFERENCES

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