

The Power of Words

What a Few Changes in Semantics Have the Potential to Do

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We so often talk about language as it relates to what our children are saying/not saying. This article focuses instead on the words that we use and the impact that they can have on our kiddos. Sometimes simply changing the way we phrase things, the tone we use, and even just our body language can have a completely different outcome on how they respond. Below is a sampling of new phrases/words to try out.

- **"...Yet"** If you catch yourself (or someone else) saying something like, "he doesn't like broccoli" or "she can't crawl", add a "yet" to the end. Children are always growing and changing – who knows what they'll be doing or liking soon!
- **"I wonder."** Leave the door open for possibility. I love to use this phrase when trying to problem solve with families. Try adding something like, "I wonder what would happen if we ____" and see where it takes you.
- Telling children what they **CAN** do instead of CAN'T: I often compare words like 'can't', 'stop', 'don't', and 'no' to the adult version of '4-letter words'. When little people hear them, they often jump to becoming upset about not being able to do whatever it was that they were doing. See if this simple shift makes any difference: instead of saying, "don't throw the ball", try rephrasing it to, "we can roll the ball or spin it. Which one?"
- **"Learning about it."** This is another great phrase to use for skills children are working on mastering, fears, and even new foods. Instead of saying, "she doesn't like brussels sprouts", we can rephrase it as, "she's still learning about brussels sprouts! Today she is squishing them to learn".



- **"Which one?"** See the example from #3. When we offer children 2 choices to pick from, it can often help them to actually make a decision and both options are still ones that we feel good about.
- **"You didn't want that to happen/that was a surprise."** I like to use this phrase when a child takes a tumble, tower falls down, or they are disappointed for some other reason. It still honors the fact that they are upset but can, for some kiddos (sometimes), help avoid a full-blown break down.
- **Comment on effort and narrate** instead of praise: ideally, we want our children to be intrinsically motivated to try things/succeed/etc. One way of building that from an early age is to comment on effort rather than achievement. This can sound like the following: "wow - you built that tower!" or "you are drawing circles" or "you have worked hard!" Sometimes I even add in the following question, "what do you like most/proud of yourself most for ____?"
- **Alternatives to 'sorry'** We all want our children to be empathetic humans as they grow up and, as such, we often encourage or request that they say 'sorry' when they take a toy, push a peer, pull on the cat's tail. What happens if they're not sorry though? What happens if they are just saying 'sorry' because we tell them to? Building intrinsic empathy can look like the following: "Billy was playing with the blocks. You took the blocks. Billy is crying. How can we help Billy feel happy?" This response only states the facts and does not cast judgment on the child. It indicates what has happened and offers them an opportunity to positively impact the situation. If the child needs some additional help, you can follow it up with the following: "do you want to ____ or ____ to help them feel happy?" (examples include: share a toy, offer hug, give snack, smile, etc.).
- **Comment on the child's strengths.** When we focus on our little one's strengths instead of weaknesses, we allow them to use those strengths to bolster the areas they are still working on. This can look like the following: "wow - you keep trying hard to build that tower" instead of "do you want to color instead? That's easier."