



Every Child a Talker

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Say what you mean; and mean what you say! (How what we say can sometimes get in the way of understanding, and lead to behaviour difficulties.)

English people, in general, are very polite. Rather than tell someone what to do directly, which might sound a bit harsh, we tend to dress it up so it sounds a bit 'nicer'. If we want someone to give us a pen, we don't say, "Give me that pen." Instead we might ask a question like, "Can you pass me that pen please?" Adults know what the message is, and instead of replying, "Yes I can." They will pass the pen.

So if we want a child to put his coat on, we might say, "Do you want to put your coat on?" or "Shall we put our coats on now?" Older children know that when a grown up says, "Shall we?" what she is really saying is "We are going to." So when we say, "Shall we go inside now?" What we are really saying is, "It's time to go in. We are going in now. (And there is no arguing) about it!"

Young children, on the other hand, often get confused by these 'mixed messages'. They think they are being asked a question, and being given a choice. So if a two-year-old is busy playing in the sand, and it is time to tidy up, we might say, "Shall we tidy up now?" Our little friend will think, "I'm being given a choice. Shall we tidy up? No thanks, I'm going to continue playing in the sand." What he says is, "NO!!!!!!" Then we have to start again by telling him that it's time to tidy up, and then we are going to do this and that, and if he doesn't tidy up then he will miss blah blah blah. By that time the damage is done, and our little friend is shouting, "NO!" and digging furiously in the sand.

Here's another scene. It's time to go home. Little Ruby wants to play for a bit longer, and mummy, who is always a bit late to pick up, comes in a bit flustered. Ruby sees her chance to make mum suffer, and starts running round the hall. Nice practitioner says to Ruby, "It's time to go home now. *Is that OK?*" It's the last part of what the practitioner says that causes the trouble. Ruby thinks, "No. It's not OK. She is giving me a choice and I'm going to stay running round."

When we say, "Is that OK?" what we really mean is, "Do you understand?" But Ruby has been given a mixed message. As well as that, Ruby senses, "This adult is a bit weak, and I can continue messing around and have some fun winding the adults up." What we should say is, "Ruby, it's time to go home now." That's all: clear message, no arguing.

I am not suggesting that we should be constantly barking orders at children: far from it. But I have observed that children who are very young and at an early stage of learning language, need to have clear messages, otherwise they get confused. Two year olds are often anxious about changing from one activity to another, so when we accidentally give them a choice, they are bound to react by saying, "No!" (Or worse!) Also children with unclear boundaries at home respond negatively when given too many choices, and we can help them by giving clear messages.

So instead of saying, "Shall we put our coats on?" try saying, "Let's put our coats on." Instead of saying, "OK?" at the end of an instruction, don't say anything at all!

"Is that OK?"