

Raising Your Kids USING POSITIVE SPEECH

[By Sue Dinwiddie]

Positive Speech is a powerful tool in raising your children. Without realizing it, parents easily fall into the habit of saying "no" and "don't" often to children. Before long children can feel negative or tune-out what the parents are saying. Save "no" for the important, emergency situations. Whenever possible, tell the child what to do, rather than what not to do. Instead of "Don't slam the door!" say "Please, close the door gently." Exchange "Don't talk with your mouth full!" with "Finish chewing your food, then you can tell me." Children who are treated with respect, tend to become respectful of others.

Ask a question only if you are willing to accept any answer. A parent asks a child if she wants to pick up her toys. The child says, "No!" Where does the parent go from here? If you want your child to pick up toys, tell her: "It is time to put away the toys."

If your child is resistant, testing the limits, try the Problem-solving Formula to help you determine how to proceed:

1. **Define your problem in behavior terms.**
"My child isn't picking up toys tonight."
2. **Gather data.** Look for patterns. How often does this happen? When does it usually happen? Did anything unusual occur shortly before this behavior? Who was around? If your child usually picks up toys, but is very tired tonight following a party, your choice of options will be different than if you child never wants to pick up toys.

3. **Select a positive option.**
Several are listed below.
4. **Implement that option.**
Try it out.
5. **Evaluate how the option worked.** If you aren't totally satisfied, think about why. What option might have been more effective? Parents get lots of practice. It is almost certain you will have another opportunity to try a different option before long.

Here are a number of positive options which are often successful.

1. **Humor.** Make a game out of putting away the toys and include some fun and laughter. "Teddy Bear, blocks and truck are tired, let's tuck them in the toy basket for the night. Good night Teddy Bear, good night blocks, good night truck."
2. **Ignore your child.** If your child is trying to get your attention by negative behavior, is not doing anything harmful to herself or others, and is not damaging materials, you may decide to withhold attention until there is a positive behavior. Can you ignore your child's toys on the floor? That will depend on your own values and the individual situation. If the toys are in the child's room and not in the way of others, the parent may decide to ignore them. If things get cluttered and the child cannot find what she wants, she will learn from the consequences of her actions. If the

room is cluttered, the parent may not be able to get in to tuck the child in that night. If this isn't comfortable for you, go to another option.

3. **Redirect the child.** Redirecting is telling a child what to do in place of what she is doing. A parent might begin to drive a truck around placing toys in it while saying, "It is time to drive the toys to the toy basket." The child may soon join in this game.
4. **Direct the child.** Describe the situation, give the child information, be brief, and let the child know your feelings. One effective way to direct children is with an extended "I" statement:

Behavior:

When you leave your toys on the floor,

Emotion:

I feel worried,

Effect:

because I'm afraid I will trip over them,

Desired Behavior:

and I want you to put them in the toy basket.

5. **Restructuring the situation.** This method is often effective. The parent changes the people, the time, or the place. If picking up toys right before the bedtime routine is frequently a problem, the parent might move pick-up time. Pick up toys before dinner is started, then structure in a new routine while dinner is prepared such as listening to story-tapes, drawing pictures, or using play dough in the kitchen. A child who is already in the kitchen might enjoy helping with the food preparation or setting the table. Sometimes, a child will respond better for a while if Dad, rather

than Mom, does pick-up time with her, etc.

6. **Offer choices to your child.** Young children don't respond well to unlimited choices. However, offering a choice between two options is frequently successful. "Do you want to put away Teddy Bear or truck first?" A second level of offering choices is the "When____, then____." approach. "When your toys are in the basket, then we can read the story you have picked out." A third level is the "Either____, or____." technique. "Either you pick up these toys, or I will put them off-limits for a day."
7. **Compromise often works well when time is of the essence.** "I will put Teddy Bear in the toy basket, while you put away the truck." If your child is very tired tonight, but usually does pick up toys, this option would be quick and allow you to get on with going to bed.
8. **Problem-solve together.** When you have time and your child is not tired, hungry or sick, you can brainstorm together what to do about picking up toys. You want to go for win-win solutions. "These toys in the middle of the floor at night are a hazard. I could trip over them; they could get broken. Shall we problem-solve together?" If your child says, "No!" you can go back to one of the preceding options. If your child says, "Yes!" negotiate. Share your feelings and your desires concerning the issue with each other. Listen to your child's reasons for not wanting to pick up toys. Then brainstorm together to resolve this situation. Let your child contribute as many ideas as possible. Children who have opportunities

to problem-solve become adept at generating solutions. They are also invested in the solution they have played a part in finding.

What if your child is so angry that you can't reason with her or get her to respond to anything? Young children easily are engulfed by their emotions. It is helpful to them to have you validate the emotion. "I can see you are very angry! When you feel calmer we can find a way to solve this problem." A highly distraught child can benefit from a short cooling-off period. This is not a punishment, nor a deterrent for the behavior. It is simply a time to cool off. Going to the same place each time helps make the cooling-off period predictable for children. Many children go to their room. Looking at books or playing with toys can help some children calm down. In 2 or 3 minutes the parent goes to the room to see if the child is ready to talk about the situation. Most young children do not need long to cool off. Sometimes parents also need time to cool off. Tell your child. "I am very upset right now! I am going to sit down for a few minutes and cool off. Then we can decide what to do."

Thinking about the behavior in a problem-solving mode can help you decide which option would be best to use. It is beneficial to evaluate the success of the option later, when you have some peace and quiet. As part of your evaluation, check whether you used a short-term, expedient option, such as compromise or redirect, or a long-term learning option, such as problem-solving together. Much of the time parents need a quick, effective strategy to be able to get on with the rest of the day. However, make sure

you build in time for learning strategies. It is the learning strategies which your child will take with her when you are not around to guide her yourself.

Your young child will probably not stop testing limits soon. That is part of her achieving ultimate autonomy. Despite her testing, she needs some limits. Children who have no consistent limits feel confused and out-of-control. You now have a large repertoire of positive ways to set limits for your child. In the long run your child will be more secure if she knows that the adults in her life will continue to have reasonable limits for her as well as guide her in positive ways to meet those limits.

Sue Dinwiddie is a former Head Teacher at Bing Nursery School, Stanford University and an Instructor/Lecturer/Trainer at Peninsula Conflict Resolution Center, Stanford University, Pacific Oaks College, Kaiser Permanente, and Community Colleges. She is a popular presenter at national, state, and local conferences, and is the author of numerous parenting and child development articles. Sue Dinwiddie is an experienced, sensitive teacher of young children and a very effective counselor to parents.