

Positive Phrasing

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... Sages are upright without causing injury,
Honest without hurting,
Direct but not tactless,
Illumined but not flashy

Tao To Ching Verse 58

What we say and how we say it are very important when working with children. When we examine the Human Tendency for Communication we see that communication is much more than spoken language. For humans, words are only one part of communication: body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice – all shape the message contained in our words. Even more elusive – the intention behind our words is also being communicated. All together body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and intentionality create the emotional context for what we are communicating.

Positive Phrasing is about aligning the emotional and verbal content of communication in positive respectful and productive ways. More specifically – positive phrasing is **the art of saying what is rather than what isn't.**

Consider the following six English words: oh our guests are already here

Now imagine how these six words might sound when combined to convey these five different emotional contents: happiness, excitement, surprise, anxiety, and irritation: the same words – but totally different messages. This of course is what makes for great actors – they deliberately seek out the elusive emotional intentions behind the words in a script. In everyday life, however, it is more problematical: we surround our words with an emotional context without even thinking about it – body language, facial expression, and tone of voice unconsciously communicate our intentions, regardless of the words we choose to use (even a warm fuzzy phrase like “I love children” can be used to communicate very different, even opposite meanings!).

Many aspects of non-verbal communication are absorbed as part of cultural adaptation in the first six years of life – under the powers of the Absorbent Mind and the Sensitive Period for Language; and the specific meaning of non-verbal communication can be different from culture to culture. Also, different languages allow for more or less obvious non-verbal communication: a language such as Mandarin relies on tone to convey the actual meaning of words – so tone of voice conveys emotional meaning in very subtle, to the foreign ear even imperceptible, ways. In English, however, most often the medium *is* the message.

On the receiving end of communication, we are constantly and unconsciously modifying our responses as we assess the emotional context of the words someone else is using. And – when there is a discrepancy between the words and the emotional content, we will always default to the emotions. We are powerful and astute readers of non-verbal communication. The younger the child, the more powerful this is: emotional content is much more important compared to the actual words. Developmentally, this makes sense: humans are born totally attuned to the emotional level of communication – children understand and are directly affected by the emotional content of a communication even when the actual vocabulary is unknown to them.

Too often, much of the communication children experience is a confusing and misleading mixed message of words and emotions. Even more unfortunate, too often the adult speaker is totally unaware of the mixed message being communicated – and completely taken by surprise when the child responds to the non verbal emotions rather than the specific words being spoken.

This results in very poor communication between adults and children – poor communication that leads to confusion and conflict in the relationship. This is compounded by the fact that so much communication between adults and children is negative – as we’ll see, negative communication (telling a child what not to do as in “don’t run”) is also confusing to children, frequently impossible for them to follow, is highly ineffective, and also can lead to conflict.

Positive communication is the opposite of this situation. Positive communication is mindful – the speaker is aware of the totality of the message intended and deliberately aligns words and emotional content. Positive communication is also scrupulously honest – not brutal, but gracious and respectful in conveying the truth of the speaker’s message.

In my experience, the best positive communication with children has two qualities: it is **true** and it is **brief**; and positive phrasing – the art of saying what is rather than what isn’t – is the best vehicle for speaking ‘true and brief’.

What is true? Some synonyms for true are “factual, accurate, exact, correct; real and genuine, valid; authentic and sincere”. Two words for the opposite of true are “false” and “fake”.

What is brief? “Short, concise, to the point; pithy.” What is the opposite of brief? “Lengthy.”

If we mindfully incorporate true and brief into our verbal and non-verbal communication, we will truthfully communicate our true intention in as few words as possible. This will result in the most effective communication possible with young children. The message we send will be the message received.

It takes time and practice to develop this skill of communicating true and brief. This is a skill to practice, hone, and perfect. We have to monitor our progress. Monitor and practice constantly until this form of communication becomes a habit – second nature, so to speak.

One of the best ways to practice true and brief is with the engine of positive phrasing: saying the one true thing we want to communicate, with the fewest words possible. As already stated: the art of saying the true thing that is, rather than the ‘everything’ that isn’t.

Why is positive phrasing effective? Because it is **clear**, it is **unambiguous**, and it **invites cooperation**. I am always on the lookout for examples of positive phrasing in our world – I found one on a TriMet bus one day: words on a window telling me “Air conditioning works best with windows closed.” Isn’t that a great example of positive phrasing? Clear, informative, pleasant, and definitely intended to invite my cooperation in leaving the window closed. Maybe I was considering opening the window, but those friendly words helped me pause and think about cooperating for the benefit of all of us on the bus that hot summer day. True and brief – conveying the one true message intended. And no judgment about my otherwise poor, inconsiderate and possibly stupid choice to open the windows – just true and brief: The air-conditioning works best if the windows are closed.

Stop signs are also very good examples of true and brief positive phrasing. Completely clear and unambiguous and also assuming you are willing to cooperate with the direction: Not a suggestion: “you probably should stop here” or “it is a good idea to slow down here if you can”; not persuasive, rationalizing or pleading either: “we’d really like you to stop here because another driver might be coming from the other direction and you might hit each other...” Just the one true message for that intersection in an effective single word: Stop.

Other examples to consider: Recycle. Not “don’t litter”; not all of the things we don’t want you to do with your litter – just the one true thing that we do want you to do. Or: “Use other door” – Unlike ‘No Entrance,’ “use other door” is simple, clear, and unambiguous, leading me to think “oh, thank you, I needed to know that.”

Positive Phrasing is always delivered as a statement. This is why it is clear and unambiguous.

Positive phrasing is not a question. A question implies indecision or a choice. Questions can trick or trap a child into thinking there is a choice when in fact there isn't. Americans in particular have a habit of using the question-mode to soften direct commands, often abetted by the ubiquitous "okay?" – as in, "Get in the car... okay? It's time for your bath... okay? Sit down ... okay?" We start with a nice declarative positive phrase, but that little word "okay" makes it suddenly a choice, often leading to "no!" We invite the "no" by turning it into a choice. We don't intend to give the choice, but we implied the choice by saying "okay?" When the child discovers that "no" was not actually an option, she is justifiably outraged; while the adult who thought he was being 'nice' by softening the command is equally outraged that the child is not complying.

Giving a choice when there isn't one is disrespectful and inauthentic, and invites a power struggle. When we give a choice, we have to be truly okay with any possible answer from the child. If there is really only one outcome desired, only give that option as a possibility. Being "nice" can be ambiguous. The child who does not comply with our request is not trying to be rude or defiant; he is just answering the question he thinks we are asking. In the service of true and brief communication, we trust that children are doing their best to respond to what we say; we are at fault if our communication is unclear and ambiguous. In the questioning mode of communication, we are inconsistent, unpredictable and sad to say, just plain liars. We invite children to ignore or manipulate us, or to regard us as unreliable communicators who are not worth listening to.

Positive Phrasing also requires **our commitment to say what we mean and mean what we say**; this commitment must be tempered, however, so that the message is honest, respectful and compassionate.

This is a rigorous requirement of us – but this mindful rigor is the only way to truly assist a developing child and successfully balance a child's need for autonomy with a child's need for secure limits. A simple example of this principle is a classic situation: the adult clearly states "It's time to go" (with or without "okay?"), but then stays to talk to another adult. If we say we are leaving, we need to leave; if we want to stay, we can say something like, "I'm going to stay and talk for 10 minutes, then we'll go" – but again, we have to leave in 10 minutes. Violating this principle invites children to ignore or manipulate us; worse, it teaches disobedience – the child does not have to pay attention or do what she is told, since most of the time the adult doesn't 'mean' it. Eventually this power struggle leads to the adult asserting their superior power over the child – which becomes the child's only clear signal that we 'mean' it.

Here are **some helpful words** to support positive phrasing, clear communication, and mutually respectful relationships.

"Can"

'Can' is my all time favorite word when speaking with children. 'Can' implies ability – you are capable of doing this; embedded in a clear, declarative statement, 'can' gives a clear message of the one thing that is possible in the situation and eliminates all possibilities contrary to that one thing, while strongly communicating the confident expectation that the child is able to carry through the desired action.

Sample 'can' statements: You can get in the car. You can join us. You can hold your cup carefully. You can use that material when it's back on the shelf. You can keep all the paint on the paper. You can sit with your hands in your lap. That's something we can talk about later.

"May"

May works just like 'can', but it's a little stronger because it also implies permission.

With both of these words, notice that the speaker is still 'off the hook' – a direct command has not been given, so if the child doesn't follow through or contradicts the statement, the adult doesn't have to assert power, and has time to re-phrase or re-think the communication.

"Let's"

I am very fond of 'let's' – it's friendly and companionable, stressing that we're doing something together with the implied message that of course, you want to do it too! "Let's go to the car now." "Let's keep our feet on the

floor.” ‘Let’s’ is a variation of the ‘can’ statement – simply changing the subject of the statement from the particular ‘you’ to the convivial ‘we’.

“I see that...”

This phrase is very handy when you aren’t really sure what message you want to send, or how the child will respond to your guidance; it buys the speaker time, while providing a stimulus to see how the child is receiving your communication. This statement is exactly how it sounds: the speaker states what is observable in the moment, as in “I see that you’re upset”; “I see that you don’t like this right now”; “I see that you are dancing on a table”.

This phrase can also introduce a string of positive phrasings for effective communication, as in: “**I see** that you’ve discovered the brown stair can sound like a marimba. **It’s time to** put the brown stair away. **Let’s** get out the rhythm instruments.”

“It’s time to...”

This phrase de-personalizes the directive even more – it’s not about what anyone does or doesn’t want to happen, it’s just time for something to happen, as in: “It’s time to leave”; “it’s time for lunch”; “it’s time to put the brown stair away” ...

“Are...”

“Are” is actually a variation on “it’s time to ...” only stronger. “Are” unequivocally identifies what is about to happen – as in “We are leaving now”; “We are cleaning up from lunch now”; “We are keeping our feet on the floor”. “Are” also affirms and encourages an on-going positive situation, as in “You are helping me”; “You are moving that box without a sound”; “We are all walking together on the path”.

“Do” Statements

Do statements are much stronger than ‘can’ and ‘may’ or any other handy verbiage listed above – they represent any direct command we give to a child. These offer positive phrasing because they state clearly the one thing that is necessary to happen at that moment – the one true thing in as few words as possible. ‘Do’ is “Walk”. ‘Do’ is “Sit here”. ‘Do’ is “Stop.”

‘Do’ is also the opposite of “No” – which is characterized by “don’t” directives. ‘No’ and ‘don’t’ require a child to ‘not’ and in general it is very difficult for a young child to ‘not’. When the need is for the child to walk, for example, the directive “Don’t run” leaves so many other possibilities that are ‘not running’ but still ‘not walking’; “Walk”, on the other hand, communicates clearly the one type of locomotion acceptable at that particular moment.

I recommend that adults count the ‘do’ commands they give to children – because with a command, adults are definitely ‘on the hook’. If we give a command, it has to happen. If we give a command and it doesn’t happen, we teach disobedience. We show inconsistency. Bottom line: Give as few direct commands to a child as possible. Save them for when they are absolutely necessary – for the times when ‘can’ and ‘may’ have not been effective and you really do need to escalate. When giving a direct command, we have to be scrupulously conscientious: commands are justified when they are necessary for physical and psychological security; they are never justified by adult pride and anger. Montessori said that anger and pride destroy our positive, productive relationship with children. We replace these with patience and humility. Positive phrasing is far from weak. It grows from patience and humility. And that is what makes it so powerfully effective.

So – to summarize and expand slightly:

Focus on True and Brief in all communication with children

Use clear, unambiguous statements that invite cooperation

Examine the intention behind your communication – remember that ‘message received is message given’: the only justified message for a young child is a message supportive of that child’s development in the context of a particular moment

Start by practicing with the phrasings listed above – these are the building blocks of positive communication.

Monitor your facial expression, body language, and tone of voice so that they match the positive intention of your words

Avoid no; use it as little as possible; save it for when it is really necessary – so that it retains its legitimate power to support physical and psychological security: we want a child to trust our ‘no’ – it means don’t do anything until I get there

Eliminate “okay” unless the child really has a choice to say decline

Offer choices whenever possible – when any chosen option will be acceptable to you and possible in the particular situation

Be careful with “please” – “please” is used for courtesy, as an invitation to cooperation and so it also implies a choice; “please” does have an important role in social communication, but it isn’t really a ‘magic word’ – as all adults know in truth

Positive Phrasing as part of aligned communication has four benefits for the child:

1. **Clarity.** The message is clear. No tricks, no confusion, no manipulations.
2. **Respect.** The child experiences a very courteous regard for feelings and dignity.
3. **Trust.** The child trusts that the adult says what he means and means what he says. In this big world that I am trying to adapt to, I can depend on that when my adult says something, that is what happens.
4. **Modeling.** The child will naturally adopt and cultivate this kind of communication when this is the communication he experiences and observes from others in the environment, and particularly when the adult that he loves and admires communicates in this manner.

A great, accessible Montessori Ally for this topic –

Alfie Kohn, author of [Punished by Rewards](#) and [Unconditional Parenting](#)

See his 2001 article from the periodical [Young Children](#), ‘Five Reasons to Stop Saying “Good Job”!’ available at www.alfiekohn.org/parenting/gj.htm

