

# How to Use Positive Language to Improve Your Child's Behavior

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"Stop it." "No." "Don't do that!" As a parent, you might find yourself using these phrases when your child begins to make his own choices. What if, rather than tell your child what he can't do, you chose words to tell him what he *can* do? This shift in language might seem small, but it can powerfully change the tone of the conversation. When you use positive language with your child, you will likely find that he communicates with challenging behaviors less often.

Unlike adults, young children aren't yet able to make the connection that when they're told not to do something, what they should do is the opposite. "Don't climb on the counter" can be vague to a child. However, "Please keep your feet on the floor" tells the child exactly what the expectation is and how he can change what he is doing. Using positive language also empowers a child to make an appropriate choice on his own, which can boost his self-esteem. When your directions specifically state exactly what to do and when, it is easier for your child to comply, and he's more likely to cooperate with the request.



## Suggestions for Families

Replace "don't" with "do". If you see your child cutting the leaves of a plant, rather than saying "Don't cut that!" you could say, "Scissors are for cutting paper or play dough. Which one do you want to cut?" It is more likely that your child will make an appropriate choice when you help her to understand exactly what options are available. As well, when you provide your child with a choice of things that he can do, he is more likely to select one because it makes him feel like he is in control. This strategy also works for you as a parent because you approve of either choice.

Tell your child "when." When your child asks for something, instead of saying no, acknowledge her wish and tell her when she can do it. This answer feels more like a "yes" to a child. For example, if your child asks to go to the park and you are working on the computer, you could say, "The park is a great idea! I need to finish this letter for work right now; we can go after lunch." Another way to positively tell a child when he can do something is with a "first-then" statement. For example, if he wants to watch TV but you need him to pick up his toys, you could say, "First, pick up your toys, then you may watch a TV show."

Give your child time to think. You may feel frustrated when your child does not respond quickly to requests and feel tempted to use demands or raise your voice. Remember that your child is still learning language and how to use it. She needs time to think about what you said and how to respond. It can take several seconds, or even minutes, longer than you to process the information. When you stay calm and patiently repeat the statement again, you will see less challenging behavior and enjoy more quality time with your child.

Sometimes your child may need you to help him remember what you asked him to do in order to do it. "I remember" statements can be useful in these situations. For example, imagine you have asked your child to put on his shoes so to go outside, and he comes to you without his shoes on, trying to go out. You can say, "I remember you need to put your shoes on before you can go outside." Stating the information as a simple fact, rather than a command, gives him the information he needs to make the right choice on his own without blaming him or making him feel like he has failed.

## Suggestions for Educators

Educators use positive language at school to help children gain confidence and independence. When educators tell children what they can do, they begin to manage themselves, routines, and interactions with peers independently. For example, a child throwing sand on the playground can be shown that, instead, she can use a shovel to put the sand in a bucket. The educator might say, "If you want to play with the sand, you can fill this bucket. Would you like the blue bucket or the red one?" In this way, the educator honors the child's interest, but directs it to a more appropriate play choice.

## The Bottom Line

Positive relationships with parents, educators and other caregivers provide the foundation for a successful and happy child, are the building blocks for your child's self-esteem and ability to empathize and predict future positive behavior choices. The manner in which you talk to your child has a significant impact on his behavior. Making positive changes to your communication style can be hard work, but with a little practice, you will see a big difference in your relationship with your child. Your child will feel more encouraged, positive and independent and, as a result, you will enjoy better overall cooperation.



More resources can be found at:  
[www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)  
[www.csefel.vanderbilt.edu](http://www.csefel.vanderbilt.edu)

