

Dec
2

Why We Choose Our Words with Children Carefully

by Donna Bryant Goertz | Montessori Blog

8 Comments

When it comes to language, our school can seem a little eccentric, well maybe quite eccentric, annoyingly so or amusingly so. Why do we choose our words so carefully and care about their use so deeply? The language we use has its roots in our ways of thinking and being. The language we use in maintaining appropriate limits and boundaries with our children reflects our thoughts and attitudes as parents in relationship with our children. When we are mindful of our language and choose our words with intention, we can explore our thoughts and attitudes and improve our relationship with our children.

Most advice about maintaining limits and boundaries is consistent in a certain way, yet when we look into the language used to give the advice we see important differences in attitude. For example, most advice on limits and boundaries tells us to stand firm and hold the line in regard to limits and boundaries. After thinking through and putting into place the structure of our child's life, taking into account developmental needs and family culture, we set the limits and draw the boundaries in such a way that our child has freedom to develop appropriately within them. We put in place support and we remove obstacles. Then we hold the line; we remain firm in a friendly but sure manner.

There are, however, subtle differences between holding the line as a reasonable and strong adult and holding the line as the willful challenge or spiteful confrontation of an adult with residual issues of our own unresolved childhood. When we hold the line appropriately, we show respect and good will toward our child. We avoid angry power struggles and humiliating shows of force. We merely hold the line in a firm but friendly way. When we try to hold the line with our child in a willful and oppositional manner, we create a pattern of power struggles and increase the conflict in family life.

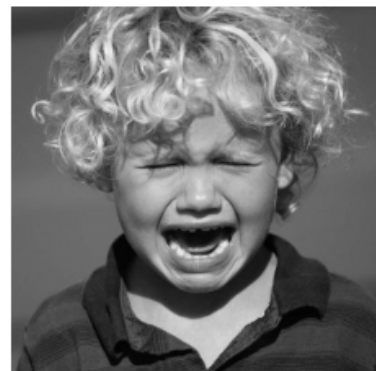
Three Different Responses

It may help to look at one scenario handled in three different ways.

Response one: Parent fails to hold the line

Response two: Parent holds the line confrontationally

Response three: Parent holds the line with good cheer and firm resolve



The Setting: Parent and three to five year old child shopping for books in the bookstore.

Parent Response One

Failing to maintain limits or “Giving in”

Our child is at first begging for the sort of book we are not willing to have in our home. She begins to whine. We then ask her to choose now from a wide selection of books that are appropriate to our family culture. We recognize that the child is becoming tired and stressed, maybe hungry. It is time to go to the car for a nutritious snack and get home to relax. She clutches the inappropriate book to her chest saying it's the only one she wants. We tell her we will walk to the cash register now and pay for the book we have chosen for ourselves. We say we will count on her to come along with one of the seven books that fit our family culture. She begins to roll around on the carpet and kick. We walk toward the door with our book. She doesn't come. The child is expressing a display of emotion, what is called a temper tantrum.

We go back and pick her up and carry her. She goes rigid and grits her teeth. She is still clutching the book we will not let her have. “Oh, well,” we think, “she's tired and hungry and this is embarrassing. Poor thing, she's so upset.” So we say to our child, “Well okay then, you can have the book, but just this once, but next time you must select from among the books that fit the family culture.”

Results

The child's outside response may be tearful glee, but deep inside she feels insecure. In her depth she knows she needs us to be strong and firm for her. She feels a sick sense of power unfitting for a young child. She has pushed against a limit that she needs to find firm and strong. She discovers that there is no one stronger or surer than she, and she's only four years old. She feels vulnerable, and she feels disdain for us. She cannot trust us or rely on us. We have let her down. Where can she find the protection and loving care she needs and deserves?

In this case the parent shows little self-discipline and weak resolve. We put excuses above our child's development. We let our insecurity and embarrassment overcome us. We frighten the child by showing her she can overpower us with an emotional display. The child may learn that being out of control is a productive strategy in life. She will continue to seek the security from the adult by acting out. Our ability to act with clarity and our comfort with providing limits allows the child to feel held emotionally. If we are able to do so, she feels safe. If we respond to an emotional display with frantic appeasement this causes a child to feel abandoned. The behavior will then escalate.

Afterward we may feel “guilty that we have given in.” We feel defeated and angry with ourselves. Not only have we let our child down, we have also let ourselves down. Finally, we have let the whole family down. By using this response the child learns to use an unhealthy strategy. We have provided our child with an example of weakness of character and a lack of integrity. We then may ask ourselves, “How will my child develop integrity if I fail to model it for her?”

Parent Response Two

Traditional Confrontational Authoritarian Approach

The scene starts out as above. We are in a bookstore. She is at first begging for the sort of book we are not willing to have in our home. Then she begins to whine. We ask her to choose now from a wide selection of books that are appropriate. It is time to go to the car for a healthy snack and get home to relax. She clutches the book to her chest saying it's the only one she wants. We tell her we will walk to the cash register now and pay for the book you have chosen for ourselves. So far so good! She begins to wail.

As the authoritarian, we say we will not give in to her and that's that. She must do as we say and take one of the seven books that fit our family and home culture, or she can just do without. We state that we mean business. And what's more if she doesn't watch out she will not get anything! At this point, she begins to roll around on the carpet and kick. Our response is to let her know that if she thinks this will get her anywhere, we'll show her how wrong she is. We are going home without any books. We let her know how sorry she will be. Maybe she'll learn her lesson then. We walk toward the door with our book. She doesn't come.

We go back and pick her up and carry her saying, "You think Mommy's going to give in but I will never give in to you when you whine and cry and throw tantrums." She goes rigid and grits her teeth. She is still clutching the book that we will not let her have. We are thinking, "I'm not going to give in to her. She's not going to get away with this." We say, "You just see if I bring you back to the bookstore again!" We pay for our own book. She refuses to give up the book in her hands. We must wrest the book from her hands and leave it with the cashier. Now she screams okay, okay, that she wants one of the other books. We say after a tantrum like that, she's not getting any books for a long, long time. I'll come to the bookstore by myself from now on. You'll be sorry; you'll see. You're not getting away with that kind of behavior. We carry her to the car screaming and kicking.

The following week we plan another trip to the bookstore, but this time we say she cannot come in because she's not getting away with that behavior. One of us goes in alone and picks a book for her while the other one takes her to the park. She asks when she can go to the bookstore again and we say we don't know, maybe never, but at least not for a long, long time. We say, "You are not getting away with that kind of behavior. What made you think you could get away with that? Remember all that screaming? Next time maybe you'll listen when we say 'no.' If you don't mind Mommy, you see what you get—nothing!" Our child thinks or says, "You're mean and I hate you!"

Results

Even though the parent's attitude in this approach at first may seem a better alternative to giving in, the language often used in this approach infers we think the child is basically untrustworthy. It assumes her motives are unworthy. It creates and reflects a relationship of power struggle and opposition. It shows that we mean to get the upper hand because we must shape the child or even break the child's will.

We think to ourselves: We didn't let her get away with it. We kept the upper hand. We showed her who is boss. She won't try that again. In following the traditional approach, we may soon wonder why we don't feel better than we do. Might there be another way? Eventually, this may lead us to do the opposite—to give in—because we recognize we are not coming from the right place. As a result, our child may feel overwhelmed, totally confused or abandoned.

Our child feels overpowered and angry, but she may also be feeling wily. She has feelings of revenge. Setting limits and drawing boundaries with anger and opposition result in our child feeling helpless and hopeless against a powerful opponent. She begins to realize she must be wily and conniving for the future. Instead of feeling like engaging in collaborative problem solving, she feels as if her parent and she were on opposite sides of a big fight. She then views her parent as an obstacle not a resource.

Parent Response Three

A Montessori Approach – Good Cheer and Firm Resolve

Be a person of your word! This maintains boundaries and provides limits from an attitude of respect and does so with good cheer! This language says that we have thought things through before we have spoken and that we mean what we say. It reflects a relationship of trust and respect for appropriate development and the value of limits and boundaries. It provides the child with a feeling of being cared for even when things are challenging.

Let's apply this better advice to the same ordinary scene with a three to five year-old.

The setting is as above. We are shopping for books and trying to make choices with our child.

Again the child is expressing a display of emotion commonly called a temper tantrum. She is begging for the sort of book we are not willing to have in our home. Then she begins to whine. We ask her to choose now from a wide selection of books that are appropriate. Simultaneously, we recognize that we have to get her to the car for a nutritious snack and home to relax. She clutches the book to her chest saying it's the only one she wants. We tell her we will walk to the cash register now and pay for the book we have chosen for ourselves. We say we will count on her to come along with one of the seven books that fit your family and home culture. She begins to roll around on the carpet and kick. We walk toward the door with our book. She does not follow.

She goes rigid and grits her teeth after we pick her up to carry her. She is still clutching the book that we will not let her have. Now is the time to check our thinking. We avoid thinking, "We're not going to give in to her." Instead we think, "We're people of our word. We're going to show her that she can trust us. We mean what we say." We pay for our own book. She refuses to give up the book in her hands. We must remove the book from her hands and leave it with the cashier. Now she screams she wants one of the other books. We don't allow ourselves to get sidetracked by her new approach. The time for her to respect the limits is before the display not after it. We say we will come back another day when she and we are sure that she can handle the limits more appropriately. We carry her to the car screaming and kicking.

The following week we plan another trip to the bookstore, but this time one of us goes in alone and picks a book for her while the other one takes her to the park. We say that we are sure she'll be ready to choose from among the books that fit our family really soon; maybe next time. We ask her what sort of book she'd most like us to buy for her. This shows her we do want to include her.

We practice with her at home what it will be like week after next when we would like to take her in to the bookstore again. We role-play the scene of her wanting a book that she may not have. We role-play how to express disappointment and even anger appropriately in a bookstore.

Results

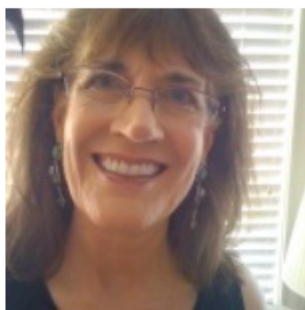
We think to ourselves and say to one another: We are people of integrity. We are trustworthy. We mean what we say. Our words and actions express our respect for ourselves and our child. We maintain boundaries with strength and good cheer.

Our child feels safe and secure. She can trust us. We set limits and draw boundaries that benefit her development and we maintain them with determination and good cheer. It feels good to her to press against the limits with all her might. Pushing hard on the boundaries and finding these to be reliable and predictable creates a safe emotional space for growing. We feel good. We can live together like this. It feels right.

Reflection

As parents, all of us can aim to be the best in our relationship with our child. Carving out enough time for planning helps achieve mindfulness in our responses to our children. Consciously setting our intention and planning what will assist us in being able to positively support the child when she needs us most.

We give our children the most of the best moments we can manage. However, we human beings occasionally slip when stressed, hurried, harried and tired. We do our best. Our children need for us to be just good enough, not rigidly perfect. When we do achieve this ability, our children get a glimpse of how they can be with their children in the future. Our children don't know this yet, but they are storing up our best moments for their own families.



Donna Bryant Goertz, founder of [Austin Montessori School](#) in Austin, Texas, acts as a resource to schools around the world. Donna's book, *Children Who Are Not Yet Peaceful: Preventing Exclusion in the Early Elementary Classroom* draws on her thirty years of experience guiding a community of thirty-five six-to-nine year-olds. She received her Montessori elementary diploma from the [Fondazione Centro Internazionale Studi Montessoriani](#) in Bergamo, Italy, and her assistants to infancy diploma from [The Montessori Institute of Denver, Colorado](#).