'Tied Up at the Office'

Choosing Our Words with Care

by Carol Garhart

My nephew Connor, like the children in Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon*, was quite a bit above average. By age three, he could tell anyone the differences between Stegosaurus, Diplodocus, Tyrannosaurus Rex! At his tiny easel, he would talk to himself: "I want purple — hmmm . . . red and blue." His speech was slightly 'off' though, when he was quite young. I remember a time when he was trying to tell me about the *ocean* and I thought he was saying *onion*. He tried three times. Finally, exasperated, he thrust his hands into the air and said "You know, Aunt Carol, the sea, like a river but bigger!"

Now he's in his forties and the exuberant dad to three-year-old Katie. Like most of us, at that time in our lives, he's been reflecting on his own childhood: the good, the bad, and the ugly. There is a particular memory, for him, of being picked up late at child care. After four decades there is still a painful look on his face when he retells the story. As a parent and grandparent I am aware of the relationship between this pained look and his love for his young daughter. Most parents readily admit there is no greater pain than seeing our children in pain. As he recalls the actions of his own parents, he can't help but think of his Katie.

As early educators we often spend as much time with young children as their parents do. This brings with it great responsibility. The things we do and say are creating the memories of childhood (the good, the bad, and the ugly) for the next generation. So I thought I would share Connor's story, knowing, of course, that you all probably have many of your own.

Connor was not quite four years old on the day my sister was delayed by more than an hour in picking him up. At the time she told me this story I was an 'at-home' mom, had not yet gone to graduate school, and had never been inside a child care center. It is almost embarrassing to admit our initial response. We laughed and laughed at the confusion of it all. It does, thankfully, speak to how much our knowledge base and sensitivity to young children has grown in four decades. So for those of you with a true sympathetic understanding of the child, please forgive us and accept that it was 40 years ago, though still relevant. Upon hearing this story, many of you will easily be able to think of similar situations at your own workplace in the last month!

My nephew was in a very reputable center in suburban Washington, DC. The teachers all had fine credentials. The center was well-funded and high end in terms of tuition. The school was fortunate to have significant administrative help so the teachers didn't have to juggle phone calls, errands, or 'walk ins'; they focused on the children. When my sister phoned, she told the receptionist that she was going to be more than an hour later than her usual pick-up time. She was worried that Connor would notice that it was getting dark and she always picked up before dark. She asked that someone tell him that she was going to be quite late.

The receptionist checked on his name, his teacher's name, my sister's name, the classroom number, and wrote it all down. After a few more phone calls — and confirming the amount for a check to the plumber who had retrieved some Duplos® from Room Three's toilet —the receptionist made her way to Connor's classroom. The children had gone

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Let's return to the beginning of my story for a minute and think of *ocean/onion*. Then there is *tired* and *up* vs. *tied up*. The second teacher had never given the message to Connor's teacher. She thought she had managed it. How easily we all say things that the receiver doesn't 'get.' This is not an example of 'negligence.' As referenced above, we do get in the habit of speaking at the level to which our responsibilities lie. I remember being out to lunch with my brother's fiancé when my children were quite young. Exuberantly I said to her, "Look! See the train?" I was used to my somewhat isolated life, which included the company of my two- and four-year-old children. My conversation was usually directed somewhere around age three! Only when I saw her surprised expression did I remember that adults know what a train is.

I imagine the same was true of a kindergarten teacher who usually aims her speech at five year olds. Giving the message to my newly-turned-three nephew, she didn't observe his confusion.

It's an easy mistake. But as we talk about intentional teaching, about children's levels of receptive and expressive language and about the language we choose to use, how to 'word' our messages needs to be part of the discussion. We also need to remember to watch for what many have referred to as "the unspoken language of children" . . . eye contact, facial expression, and body language.

In the early days of Sesame Street there was a character called Bad Bart. He frequently tied people up. Sometimes it was to a pole, other times railroad tracks. This was 40 years ago! The point is, Connor knew what tied up meant, but his interpretation had no meaning for "tied up at the office." He thought someone 'bad' had hurt his mother. He didn't know if anyone would come for him. It was getting dark and he was scared. His 'unique' speech, at the time, prevented a teacher from understanding him. (I'm not certain that "tied up at the office" would be better understood by a five year old. But probably a five year old would comment on his confusion.) In this case the teacher was used to older children and really didn't know Connor well enough to be sure he understood or to console him if his mom's late arrival was upsetting to him.

I think the scenario was probably unavoidable under the circumstances. I tell the story because I think of the many ways we all say things that can easily confuse or mislead young children. Just last month I heard a teacher say 'broken home' to another teacher when describing a child's family in the midst of a difficult divorce. It was naptime, but children don't always sleep. They were toddler teachers and too frequently we think very young children don't listen or understand adult conversations. Clearly a two year old does not have a conceptual understanding of 'divorced.' Tiny children, however, know what 'broken' means. When the car is broken, you can't get to the beach. When the Internet service is broken, you can't play games. When a glass drops to the floor, it shatters . . . is dangerous, and can never be put back together again. It is not a way any of us want to refer to a child's home or family.

Children always listen to us as they try to make sense of their world. They hear our tone of voice. They watch our facial expressions and body language. They 'hear' our authenticity — and insincerity. They ponder our words. They view us as interpreters and meaning makers. We need to choose our words with care.

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outside already. It was winter and cold. When she noticed that the children in the classroom next door were getting ready to go out, she gave the note to that teacher and asked her to give it to Connor's teacher. The teacher who now had the note taught kindergarten not preschool. So her expectations surrounding language and children were, understandably, somewhat different.

Outside, Connor's teacher was mediating a dispute over a truck between two three year olds. Her assistant was heading back into the building with a child who had just thrown up. The kindergarten teacher knew who my nephew was and, assessing the involvements of her colleagues, went to him herself. Kindly, I'm sure, she said, "Connor, your mom is going to be late, honey. She's tied up at the office," then turned her attention to her own charges. My nephew still describes this as the beginning of the longest hour of his life. (Dramatic, I know… but think, he's not quite four!)

When my sister finally arrived, the children were still outside; there were many activities. Connor was only three and is still a bit of an introvert so it was not unusual that he was by the fence, alone, looking out. The minute his mom saw his face, she knew he was not okay. His nose had been running so long that the evidence covered his snowsuit as well as his face. She knew he did not have a cold. His eyes were puffy and he ran to her with unusual exuberance. "Who untied you?" he asked. "Who did it? Who did it? Were they bad?"

My sister quickly approached his teacher to try to find out what was going on or what had happened. "Nothing, really," she said. "He's been really tired." She explained that he had cried a great deal which was unusual for him, so she had asked several times if he was alright. "All he kept saying was *tired* and *up* so I assumed he'd been up late last night. I couldn't get him to settle down," she concluded.