

POSITIVE Words Create Worlds NEGATIVE

by Lisa J. Lucas

*We live in an ocean of words;
but like a fish in water,
we are often not aware of it.*

Stuart Chase

The Wisdom of Threes

A conversation I overheard from a group of three-year-olds heightened my awareness of the frequency of complaining that permeates our daily interactions. It was a typical fall day; I was observing my preschool field practicum student from the university. She was working at a table with two children and the remaining preschool children were engaged in centers. She rang a bell, which meant that the children should rotate centers. Three children were in a heated debate at the block area. It went as follows:

Susie: Tommy, you have to clean up your blocks and move to the painting center.

Tommy: You can't tell me what to do. I don't have time to paint, I'm still building, and I want to finish making this castle. I need more time.

Jane: I'm telling the teacher, Tommy. You know you can only build until the bell rings, and then you have to go and paint, and if you don't paint, you won't get snack, and then you won't be able to go outside and play. You are running out of time to get done.

Susie: Tommy, you need to *move!* We can only have two here at the blocks, and I'm so stressed I can hardly think of what to build. *I just can't take it anymore.*

Jane: Tommy, you are *always* so slow. You're a mess.

Tommy: I want to go home. I want my mom.

A few themes should be immediately apparent here. The first is the ridiculousness of the time limits we impose on children. The second, which is the focus of this article, is the collection of words and phrases that sadly were used appropriately by these very young children. The three-year-olds were bullying and complaining, with the correct language and intonation. The phrases, "I don't have time," "I'm so stressed," and "I can't take it anymore" aren't words we want to hear from healthy, happy children. Where did they get this language? I don't know for sure, but I can speculate: they are mimicking the adults in their lives.

Teacher Talk

Now, I know what you may be thinking. When teachers are in front of children, they don't talk like that. They must have heard that language from their parents. Maybe. Maybe not. Teachers spend their days giving directions, teaching lessons, and providing feedback, all of which

require words. Denton (2007) in her text, *The Power of Our Words*, stated that language is one of the most powerful tools available to teachers. She emphasized that it permeates every aspect of teaching and learning, and what children hear and interpret has a significant impact on how they think, act, and learn. Teachers' words can shape children's identities, as well as their relationships with their peers.

Most teachers carefully choose their words when teaching, and use appropriate language in front of children. So where does this complaining, negative language come from? Again, I can only speculate. Consider what you hear in your break or lunch room, often called the teachers' lounge. In my experience, I wouldn't describe what I hear as skillful teacher language. What about on the playground or in the hallway, or possibly in the classroom with a colleague while students are occupied during free play? I will be the first to admit there have been times when maybe, just maybe, I have talked with



Lisa Lucas is Associate Professor and Graduate Coordinator at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Prior to joining the university, Dr. Lucas served as a preschool teacher, primary-age classroom teacher, and an administrator. Her

mission is to support educational institutions that help teachers understand the importance of a growth mindset and the need to be fully present in their work with children.

my colleagues about personal matters while my students were within earshot. I vaguely recall complaining about the flat tire I got on the way to work. I also remember sharing how frustrated I was with another colleague who was not doing her fair share. Oh, and there was the time I complained to anyone who would listen about a curriculum revision I objected to. The truth is, I recall countless times I have complained in front of my students. I wonder how many of my complaints have been overheard by children? After all, the complaints we air don't disappear into the atmosphere; those who hear them internalize many of them.

Of course we can't be expected to avoid talking to our colleagues about the challenges of our personal lives. As teachers we are surrounded by children all day, day after day, and a small dose of venting to adults is normal and to be expected. Complaining is one way of explaining how an issue affects us. Although we should talk things through because it's not healthy to keep our thoughts and feelings inside, we want to be aware of how many of our conversations are unproductive. It may be more than you think.

Words Create Worlds

If you listen carefully, you start to notice the language people use, and you may find that complaining is often a central theme in many conversations. Complaints are often conversation starters. We complain about our busyness almost as a badge of honor. As you start to tune in to conversations, you'll find that complaining is an integral part of most people's exchanges. When I raised my awareness of complainers, I was reminded of purchasing a new car. All of a sudden I would see that same model and color car everywhere, whereas before I bought it, I rarely noticed it. The reason is simple: what you give your attention to, grows. As a

result, I began to monitor my own speech. I realized I often used a complaint as an icebreaker to help me connect with others and get the conversation started. I was more likely to receive a response when I complained. My co-workers and I bonded over how overworked and exhausted we were. We would even attempt to "out complain" one another in a competition of "Ain't it awful!" We could always connect over how overworked, underappreciated, and exhausted we felt.

Complaints are common greetings for many people. For example, if someone asks, "How are you doing?" and I respond, "Great! Life is good," it's a conversation stopper. If, however, I respond by sharing how tired I am or how lousy I feel, I not only receive a response, I receive some empathy. Lou Holtz, former American football player and coach said, "Never tell your problems to anyone. Twenty percent don't care and the other 80 percent are glad you have them." Now, I don't believe that's always the case, but I would imagine there is an element of truth to this.

Work isn't the only environment in which complaining seems to be the norm. End-of-the-day conversations with my spouse once again illuminated the amount of time, energy, and attention we give to what goes wrong in any given day, rather than what went right. Realizing this, I began to question the cost of all the complaining words that are swirling in the environment around us. All the complaints in the world don't change anything, except to generate more negative energy.

Complaining is simply non-acceptance of what is, and is rarely solution oriented. The complaining words we use have a negative charge

that affects our internal state of mind and the way we feel.

So what can we possibly do to minimize the amount of complaining we encounter? How do you turn around the "Negative Noras" in your environment? The place to start is with ourselves. We can choose the words we want to use. Affirming words can be inspiring. Negative words can be devastating. Funny words can make us laugh, sad words can bring us to tears. Encouraging and supportive words can boost morale and self-esteem, while judging and condemning words can destroy our confidence.

I have a better outlook on my work environment if I arrive each day looking for the positives, appreciating the small things that go well. I focus my attention on the good, rather than complaining about the bad. On a mission to reduce complaining and negativity in my life, I began conducting workshops for teachers on the topic of gratitude; my goal was to shine a light on the good in our lives, rather than the negative.

In my search to reduce my own complaining I stumbled on a book by Jon Gordon, *The No Complaining Rule* (2008) that describes how one company created and implemented a no complaining rule. I followed this company's example by implementing a no complaining rule in my Pre-School Learning Environment class at the university. The purpose was to heighten awareness of the words we used, specifically complaining language.

I challenged my students to see how



long they could go without complaining. None of them made it through a full day. (Neither did I!)

There is a need for heightened awareness of the amount of complaining and negative language that occurs on a daily basis in schools. As teachers, we choose our words and, in the process, construct the classroom worlds for our students and ourselves.

Complaining does not work as a strategy. Any time we spend complaining detracts from achieving our goals. And complaining won't make us happier in the long run. To turn this situation around, I've formulated ten strategies to help reduce complaining.

10 Strategies for Creating a Complaint-free Work Environment:

- Take a long, deep breath before you speak.
- Monitor the words you use.
- Notice your thoughts, and change the negative thoughts you think.
- Monitor your self-talk, your internal meanderings.
- Notice the words others use; become aware of the language you hear.
- Judge less, accept more. Look for the good in others rather than faults and mistakes.
- Envision those who annoy you as small children in a sandbox waiting for their turn with the shovel.
- Practice gratitude. Take in the good; record it if possible.
- Decide whether you want to be right or happy.
- Decide what's worth complaining about. Intentional complaining is better than mindless complaining.

These ten strategies can be summed up with the advice of Mahatma Gandhi (as cited in Gold, 2002, p. 369.)

*Keep your thoughts positive because your thoughts become your words.
Keep your words positive because your words become your behavior.
Keep your behavior positive because your behavior becomes your habits.
Keep your habits positive because your habits become your values. Keep your values positive because your values become your destiny.*

We have all read the research about the correlation between the number of words children hear in their everyday lives and the number they are able to produce when they learn to talk. Research indicates that children with parents who are professionals hear significantly more words than children in working class families. However, if the children in the families of professionals are hearing language that represents overwork, strain, stress, and exhaustion, what kind of a message are we sending our children? As we navigate through our frenetic days, are we aware of the implications our words have on the children in our care?

Choose Your Words like You Choose Your Friends

In his book, *Choice Words*, Johnston (2004) said, "If I learned anything from Vygotsky (1998), it is that 'children grow into the intellectual life around them' (p. 88). That intellectual life is fundamentally social, and language has a special place in it. I would add that it includes the language they overhear, formally and informally. When we hear a child exclaim, "Oh sh**!" as their juice spills, our ears perk up. We need to take just as seriously the child who remarks to themselves, "I'm so stupid," or

"I've had enough," because they may be holding up a mirror to the language they hear us using.

We want to create environments that encourage possibility-thinking language, words that convey healthy learning communities in which caring, thoughtful language surround both children and adults. Raising our awareness of our use of language is the first step.

References

- Denton, P. (2007). *The power of our words: Teacher language that helps children learn*. Turners Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children Inc.
- Gold, T. (2002). *Open your mind, open your life. A book of Eastern wisdom*. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel Publishing.
- Gordon, J. (2008). *The no complaining rule*. Hoboken, NJ: Jon Wiley & Sons.
- Johnston, P. (2004). *Choice words: How our language affects children's learning*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

