Creating a Culture that Acknowledges the Power of Words

by Carol Garboden Murray

The language used by adults in an early childhood setting is one of the most telling indicators of the values of a center. Each center has its own culture of language that consists of often heard phrases and scripts used when teaching and caring for young children. Listening closely to words, tones, and scripts — we tune into what is unseen, the auditory climate. Language is contagious. The good thing about the contagious quality of language is that when teachers can use language thoughtfully they can provide strong role models. The downside is that teachers often 'pick up' or overuse phrases they have 'caught.' Sometimes, upon examination, we may find that phrases we habitually use or overuse don't match our values or reflect the climate we intend to create.

With a little guidance and leadership, teachers can become more aware of their language and they can work to shape their language use in the classroom as they develop specific intentions about how it will influence children. As directors we can look for ways to build a practice of language reflection at our

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centers. We have the role of asking ourselves if the words we hear align with the mission and goals that define the work we do with children and families.

In the past few years at our center we've had some great discussions about language that demonstrate the profound possibility for growth this type of reflection offers. Since we are a campus-based center and we supervise student teachers and Work Study aides, language use comes up frequently as we give direction to those new in the field. Within a positive guidance approach we always remind our new students that we tell children what they CAN do, instead of using words like *no, stop,* and *don't* which only sends a negative message. We try to get everyone on the same page about using language that is respectful with simple tips like: get down on a child's level to make eye contact, speak in comforting positive tones, and don't use sarcasm.

"That's not nice!"

Recently we noticed the phrase, "That's not nice!" was being used at our center. Although it was fairly easy for our student-teachers and aides to understand why we don't want to overuse negative words like "No," they often used "That's not nice" while coaching children through conflict and social negotiation. Here's a scenario I observed:

Mary is happily playing with the toy phone in the dramatic play area. Gwen observes her playing, walks over to her, and tries to grab the phone from her. Mary holds onto the phone tightly. Gwen hits her and grabs the phone. Mary begins to cry and a tug-of-war with the toy phone ensues. The student-teacher comes to help and says, "Gwen, that's not nice. Let me help you give it back to Mary so we can figure out a better way to solve this problem."

The student-teacher used some good skills in this situation:

- She quickly got down on the children's level to help them through the social conflict.
- She used a calm low voice.
- She let the children know she was there to keep them safe and help them solve the problem.

However, I asked her to reflect upon the words "That's not nice" and think about other ways to give objective guidance. We talked about how words like 'nice' and 'not nice' are judgmental and that when young children are learning social skills they are not acting out of 'nice' or 'not nice' motives — they are just using the social skills they have available. We brainstormed other possible language choices for this situation:

- "Hitting is not okay." (*Okay* conveys **not appropriate** in an accurate clear term.)

■ "Hitting hurts!" (Describing the behavior and its consequences is clear and logical — not judgmental.)

■ "Ouch! It looks like Mary is hurt." (Showing empathy for the child who is hurt is another way to help children see the impact of their actions.)

As I traveled outside of my own center, supervising students who were completing their practicums in various centers in the area, I again heard the phrase "That's not nice" many times. I noticed there are some centers where this is a commonly-used phrase and other centers where this phrase isn't used at all. I brought my observations back to our staff meeting where we put the phrase "That's not nice" on the table for discussion. We listed reasons we didn't want this to be an acceptable phrase at our center. Hearing the teachers articulate why this phrase was not, in their view, appropriate, was an empowering way to reinforce our beliefs and connect our daily practice with our larger program vision and values.

Our Reasons *Not* to Use "That's not nice!"

Reason: We know that when children hear judgment words (nice, good, bad) they often internalize and personalize these words ("That's not nice" is felt as "I'm not nice"). We work to use words that are descriptive and clear, focusing on the behavior and not the child, helping children to see consequences of behavior with the goal of helping children gain prosocial skills.

Value #1 — We value a child's emerging sense of self: We want children to feel good about themselves and their emerging abilities.

Value #2 — We value LANGUAGE as a powerful teaching tool: We want to teach and guide — not scold, judge, or blame.

Value #3 — We value a problem-solving approach: Children learn from conflict resolution that focuses on naming the situation and finding a solution. Every social interaction is an opportunity for learning.

Value #4 — We value our knowledge of child development and want our language to reflect an understanding of social skill development. We know that children have social conflict because they are practicing and learning how to be social (not because they are 'not nice').

Calling Children 'Friends'

A few years ago I noticed that several of the teachers regularly called the children 'friends' when referring to a group. "Listen, friends, it's time to get our coats on" or, "Let's meet over in library with all our friends." I might not have seen a problem in occasionally referring to children as friends, but in this situation it had become overused, habitual, and pervasive as it spread throughout the center. Calling the children 'friends' also morphed into a life of its own when it moved from addressing the whole group to addressing individuals. Here's what I began to hear: "Sam, go ask your friend Lucy if you can have a turn when she is done" or, "I see your friend, Alex, looks upset that you grabbed the yellow shovel from him." It became apparent to me that it wasn't accurate to name one child as another child's friend, especially during a critical period such as preschool when friendship becomes a central developmental theme and even less so during conflict resolution when children were not feeling particularly friendly.

I saw this situation as an authentic opportunity for staff development. What followed were individual discussions, small team meetings, and whole staff meetings on the topic of becoming observers (listeners) of our own language. As a staff we were able to examine the use of the term *friends* and it lead to heartfelt discussions about language.

Some teachers felt that calling children 'friends' promotes a friendly atmosphere in the classroom. Others felt it was unprofessional and inaccurate. The examples from our conversations illustrate how taking a close look at language use can lead to careful examination of values and goals within a center:

"We shouldn't call children friends. We are their teachers, not their friends!"

"Yes, of course we know that, but I am not always literal in my language. Calling the children friends sounds loving and endearing. We are a child care center, and it's important to create a home-like friendly atmosphere."

"We might not be literal as adults, but children are. I don't want them to think I am dictating or deciding their friendships."

"Well, we do want them all to be friends, don't we?"

"Yes, that would make life easier, but it isn't the case and it isn't honest or respectful to take a 'Let's all be friends approach.' Calling children 'friends' doesn't make them 'friends'. "

What Do We Call the Group?

We talked about how it is helpful to have a few terms to refer to the group; it keeps our language fresh for phrases we say over and over again:

■ We agreed that the most professional and accurate way to address the group is to use the terms 'chil-

dren,' 'boys and girls,' 'preschoolers,' or 'toddlers.'

■ Some teachers said they might occasionally use an endearing term like 'friends' or 'gang' to address the group, but that it would be novel rather than habitual.

■ We talked about how the over use of any word can cause it to lose power and meaning. We didn't want to do this with the word 'friends' because we value this word and what it stands for.

What Do We Call Individuals?

■ We agreed that naming one child as another child's 'friend' is not appropriate.

■ We made a decision to be more conscious about calling individual children by their names.

■ The discussion on 'friends' led us to talk about other terms like 'honey' and 'dear.' We acknowledged that sometimes these words come naturally when caring for children. Again, we felt using these terms should not be routine and that a habitual use of endearing terms can sound impersonal.

■ We believe that making an effort to call each child by his or her name supports the value we place on relationships and individualization.

The over use of the term 'friend' did not support our goals in helping children understand their true feelings and their authentic relationships.

One day I heard a teacher talking to a group of girls who were excluding others. She said, "You don't have to play with everyone right now, but you do need to be kind to everyone. We need to keep everyone's feelings safe at our school." I used this example as a springboard to talk about how we can teach respectful behavior without trying to force a "let's just all be friends" approach.

After examining our language carefully, we decided that we would all be more thoughtful and accurate with the use of the word 'friend'.

Reflecting Upon Our Language

Developing intentional language use within a center offers challenges and rewards, which illustrate the complexity of our work with children and families. Although we need to establish guidelines and common ground, we can't dictate or prescribe language, because we respect that unique personalities and relationships are at the heart of this human work. Language is personal, flexible, and evolving and it can be a vulnerable topic for correction and improvement. Inspiring a culture of self-reflection and developing a way of teaching that acknowledges the power and importance of language takes time and trust among teachers and directors. Here are some ways to support a culture that acknowledges the power of language:

Evaluations: Regularly include language use as one criterion in yearly evaluations of teachers. The yearly meetings between teachers and director are a great time to have discussions about general topics, such as tone of voice, volume, facial expressions, and language. Ask teachers if they will be open to ongoing discussions and reflections about language use throughout the year to set the tone.

Staff Meetings: Include examples of positive and powerful language use on the agenda at each staff meeting. Telling a story about a teacher whom you observed crouching low to help two children resolve a conflict and then describing specifics about her language use that made the conflict resolution so effective lets the teachers know how much you value language and that you really are listening all the time.

Use Yourself as an Example: As directors, we are the standard-bearers in our centers and it is exciting and somewhat humbling to awaken to the influence we have each day. We can model positive and appropriate tones, phrases, words, and scripts. We can also tell teachers about our own growth with language. I often tell teachers how hard it was to break certain language habits when I first started teaching, such as ending every sentence with a question when it was meant to be a directive ("Are you ready to wash your hands now?").

Parent Night and Center Tours: Educate parents about how high-quality programs look and sound. At parent night and on tours, I give families specific examples by saying,

"What you will see when you enter the classroom is teachers sitting on the floor with children. Teachers are not hovering over children or talking at them; they are talking with them. What you will hear is teachers and children engaged in meaningful conversations and teachers modeling respectful positive language."

Teachers hear me telling parents this over and over again so they are continually reminded of our values and the importance of language.

Communication is at the heart of our work with children and families. Language is our most immediate and powerful tool; it can teach us about ourselves and ask us to examine our own values (if we listen closely to what we say and how we say it!). We always have the power to change, improve, and shape our language to become intentional educators. When we strive for this level of deliberate conscious communication, we reach a new level of professionalism.

Resources that Help Us Examine Our Language

Evans, B. (2009). *You're not my friend anymore.* Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.

Gartrell, D. (2004). *The power of guidance.* Glifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning.

Katz, L., & McClellan, D. (1999). *Fostering Children's Social Competence: 1999 (2nd Edition).* Washington DC: NAEYC.

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