

## Special Feature

# AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE - Saying It Like It Is

By Rosemary Waldron

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Ask any preschool teacher - Is it important to model language for young children? - and the answer would be a very loud "Yes!" The teacher might go on to tell you that young children are language learners and that the critical period for language development begins in infancy and lasts through to the early school years. J. Nash, (1997) reports that the window of opportunity for the development of syntactic understanding, the rules related to word order and communicating meaning, is generally closed by age five. Young children are also busy learning the phonology of their language, which is the particular sounds of their mother tongue, and vocabulary, semantics and the pragmatics of language.

Now, if we were to ask another question - Is it important to model respect for young children? - we might get an even louder "Yes!" Children are members of communities, and they learn about themselves and how to relate to others in their families, preschool classrooms, neighbourhoods, etc. by watching and listening to the important people in their lives. J. Stone, (2002) reminds us that "children learn from what adults say and from how they say it... modeling with words and manner how people deal with each other". Our goal, then, is to show children how to be with us and with each other, for the benefit of the individual and the whole group.

However, sometimes our goals and beliefs about supporting young children's development are somewhat out of kilter with our practices. Picture this. Three-year-old Amy tells her hurried dad as he rushes away from the day care centre at drop off time. "You need to use your listening ears when I'm talking to you." Or, your two year old son tells you that the TV is busy when you tell him it's time for you to watch your show. Or how about if four-year-old Anthony tells his grandmother to have a no thank-you taste when she passes over the creamed corn at Sunday dinner. These fictitious situations might bring about a chuckle, or perhaps some indignation, because it is so blatantly inappropriate for children to talk to adults this way. But, of course, we have to ask ourselves, where do children learn to talk like this? Where do they pick up these words and this behaviour? Could this be what we're modeling?

Some of the common directives and explanations we use in our programs are not really accomplishing our overall language, social and emotional development goals for children. Some of these sayings are relatively benign, some are confusing and some actually have the potential to harm children.

The benign sayings are easy to say, because we tend to say them so often, but their syntax is not correct. They include sayings such as:

- ✓ listening ears
- ✓ walking feet
- ✓ inside/outside voices

Instead of using these roll-off-the-tongue sayings, we should talk to children as we would talk to each other. Say what you want to say clearly and give a reason for your request. e.g. "Please listen. I want you to hear this so you'll know what to do."

THOSE SAYINGS THAT ARE CONFUSING INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- ✓ That toy is busy. Toys are inanimate objects and can't, in and of themselves, be busy. Only people and animals can be busy.
- ✓ Use your words. Young preschool children have vocabularies of approximately 2000 to 4000 words. How are they to know what specific words we want them to use in these situations? If children knew what words to use, they'd be using them. They often need us to ask questions, interpret the situation and repeat other people's words in order to know what words to use.
- ✓ Have a no-thank-you-taste. "No thank you" implies that you do not want any and are not going to have the thing that's being offered. How can we ask children to not have a taste and have a taste at the same time? Instead we could simply offer a taste or use encouragement and suggest that they "Try it - you might like it today."
- ✓ Friends All children in the group are not really friends with all of the other children in the group all of the time. In spite of our best attempts at community building, there are times when some children really don't like other children in the group. Insisting that the children call each other friends does not make the children actually be friends.
- ✓ You need to ...whatever. Often times when we simply want children to do something, we tell them that they need to do it. A need is something that is necessary for the child's well-being. More often than not, when we tell children that they need to do something, it actually relates to our own desires, that is, what we want them to do.

Finally there is the category of sayings that have the potential to be harmful to the child, particularly as it relates to his or her emotional development:

- ✓ "Put your tears away", or "You're o.k." said in response to a crying child. Both of these sayings tell the child that we are denying their feelings and that we're asking them to also deny their feelings. Although we may feel uncomfortable with the tears of a child, we should acknowledge their pain and sorrow and help them find ways to cope. Acknowledging feelings is the single most important thing that we can do to help children learn to manage those feelings.
- ✓ Asking a child to say, "No thank you", when s/he is struck by another child. As children are developing their sense of independence they are also learning how to defend themselves and make their wishes known. We should be helping them develop self-control and a sense of efficacy in these situations. When children are hit by other children, we can model an appropriate response. We can suggest that they say something like, "Stop. You're hurting me." We want children to know that they are capable of dealing with difficult interpersonal situations and that they don't have to be overly polite to people who are hurting them.

As early childhood professionals, we carry a very great responsibility in supporting the development of our children. In order to ensure that the goals that we have for young children match the practices that we use, we need to be genuine, be real and be authentic with them. We need to say it like it is.