

POSITIVE SPEAKING



It's 8:15, the school bus is coming, and your child is searching for a homework paper. You shout, "Get moving! Hurry, or the bus will leave! You should have thought of this last night!" Your child sobs. Guilt compounds your anger. The bus collects your child minus the homework. And, so, another day begins on a negative note.

When a child stumbles, as all children do, a parent's biggest challenge is how to respond appropriately. Is it possible to turn a regrettable scene into a rewarding learning experience?

Yes, by speaking positively.

Acknowledge Emotions

Positive speech begins with positive listening. Acknowledging the child's emotions comes first.

Collect your thoughts before responding, especially when you are angry, upset, or unpleasantly surprised. The more dramatic the child's predicament, the more impressive your response will be. What will your child remember -- your wrath or your warmth? When a child is out of control, he needs the calm reassurance of someone who is not equally unrestrained. He needs a grown-up.

Suppose your daughter is despondent because her team lost the elementary school quiz bowl. Perhaps she is 2-E, or twice-exceptional (gifted with learning differences). She knew all the answers because she is brilliant but didn't press the buzzer fast enough because she has SPD. Losing was all her fault, she cries.

Don't dismiss her dejection with, "It's nothing to get upset about; it's just a game." Instead, acknowledge her feelings: "I know you're really disappointed. I'd like to hear about it." Letting your child be sad or angry or disappointed -- rather than squelching those non-happy emotions -- helps her learn to manage her feelings.

When you listen and reply thoughtfully, you are giving the child the consideration

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that you want and expect for yourself. Although a child's feelings may not be just like yours, they are just as valid.

Point Out What Is Good

Reinforce the positive about the child's feelings and actions, even when her team loses or something else doesn't go the way she hoped. Help her assess her experience in a positive way by talking over what she did right and what she may do better the next time. Say, "It's wonderful that you care so much. That makes you a valuable member of your team."

Say, "I noticed that you clapped for the winners and didn't cry. You can be proud of your sportsmanship and self-regulation." Verbalizing will help a child with autism or SPD recognize her behavioral responses and will give her internal audio tapes to replay when she needs to comfort herself.

Use "I" Messages

Let's imagine that your child is jealous of her new brother. She punches you and then pinches the baby.

Instead of, "You're a bad girl," use a message such as "I know," "I hear you," and "I see." "I" messages are empathetic. They tell the child you are involved and avoid the blame and superiority inherent in many "you" statements.

Try, "I know you are angry, but I don't like to be punched, and the baby doesn't like to be pinched! People like to be patted, like this."

Separate the child from the offense. Make it clear that you reject the punching and the pinching; you do not reject the child. Especially for the child with autism, who may have a deficit in Theory of Mind (the ability to interpret others' beliefs, intentions, and emotions), an "I" message tells her, constructively, how her actions affect you and others.

Realize Your Child Would If He Could

Picture your dyspraxic child knocking over the recycling bin. He is ashamed of his clumsiness. Rather than scolding him, remember that sensory-based motor challenges cause him to bumble because he misgauges his body in space. Startled by his own lack of coordination, he'll appreciate hearing, "Whoops! Cans and bottles are rolling everywhere! Let's pick them up." Then he may enjoy "rollerskating" on two towels to wipe up the floor.

Just think how grateful you would be if, after washing the new red T-shirt with the white clothes, you heard someone say, "I guess you've had a hard day," instead of, "You're always so careless!"

Be Direct

Sarcasm bewilders children with autism and SPD. Rather than, "Thanks a lot for making us late," which is confusing to literal-minded kids, say, "Being late makes everyone cranky. Being on time feels good. Tomorrow, let's be ready early."

Like sarcasm, subtlety is often lost on children with auditory processing challenges and delayed language skills. For example, I heard a mother attempt to fortify her fearful boy when she dropped him off at preschool. She said, "Always know that I don't *like* you; I *love* you!" In other words, "I don't merely like you. My affection is much stronger than that. I really, really adore you."

But her comment was way too subtle. What he heard was that Mommy didn't like him. He stared at her with grief and disbelief and burst into tears. A more positive statement might have been "I like you *and* I love you," or simply, "I love you."

Say What to Do (Not What Not to Do)

Let's say your child has tactile over-responsivity, low muscle tone, and poor motor planning, so opening doors is challenging. He tries to kick the door open. Say, "Can you show me another way to open the door?" instead of, "Don't



kick the door!" Indicate the doorknob or push bar and give him time to practice until he becomes successful.

Speaking positively means being affirmative. Say, "Remember your boots," rather than, "Don't forget!" Plant the word "remember" into their ear, and children may do just that. Plant "don't forget," and children may remember to do the last thing they heard -- that is, to forget!

Thank Your Child

Let's assume your child has a few assigned chores at home. He often neglects them, and maybe you often nag him.

Try thanking him in advance. Say, "Thanks for setting the table/clearing your place/putting your socks in the hamper. I appreciate your help so much." This is preferable to, "How many times do I have to tell you to?"

Also, notice when your child is helpful without being reminded. Say, "Thank you for letting the dog out. What would I do without a daughter like you?" This beats, "Whose dog is it, anyway?"

Be There

Perhaps your teenager is furious because his brother is hogging the Xbox controller. He vents his anger on a closet door, smashing several louvers with his fist.

After taking a deep breath, say, "I see you're really angry!" Sometimes in a situation like this, less is more. You may be surprised how rapidly the tension dissipates when you stop talking, approach your kid, and open your arms. Under stress, everybody needs human

contact with someone who is simply there. Being there is the most positive statement a parent can make.

Speaking Positively Challenges Us All

Positive speaking takes patience and practice. It is worth the effort.

Despite your best efforts, however, you'll occasionally revert to sounding like the wicked stepmother. The reality is that speaking positively all the time is very difficult. But while it is legitimate to say "No" and "Don't" when, for example, a child is in danger, there are countless other times when parents simply overreact.

When you feel you have overreacted to a situation, your child undoubtedly feels the same way. Try, "I blew it when I yelled at you," or "I was irritable and said something I'm sorry about." You won't relinquish your parental authority when you apologize; on the contrary, you will reveal that the process of making mistakes and learning from them is itself a positive experience.

Thus, when your child is moving slowly and the bus is coming quickly, you might pause and say, "I know you'd like to find your homework. You worked hard on it! Let's plan to talk over what you can do in the future to help yourself remember. Now it's time to leave for the bus." Later, sit down and brainstorm together. Your interest will encourage your child to think for himself, take responsibility for his actions, and feel good about himself and his place in the world. ■



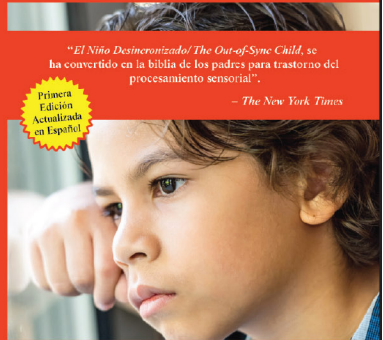
Carol Stock Kranowitz is the author of the "Sync" series, including *The Out-of-Sync Child*, *The Out-of-Sync Child Has Fun*, *The Out-of-Sync Child*

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