

Talking common sense

Smart baby, perfect mimic

Your baby, like all babies, is capable of learning any of the approximately six thousand languages that are currently spoken on this planet, but she will learn the one (or more) that she hears, the one she is immersed in. The English language is spoken very differently throughout the world, but if you've got a kiwi accent, that is what your baby will hear and catch. She can't do otherwise.

Vocabulary? Same deal. Your baby will have as rich a vocabulary as the people that he spends the most time with use. That is a good reason for using the richest vocabulary you are capable of. Some people mistakenly use a simple vocabulary when speaking to babies and toddlers, they unwittingly deprive them of the very tools they will need to communicate and to think with. They say that babies can't understand big words. Well to start with, the babies can't understand any of the words that you use with them. But babies are smart - and before long they learn the meaning of all the words that you use. When you use a rich vocabulary you give them the chance to keep growing theirs.

It's catchy

The language, the accent, the vocabulary and the sayings, - we catch them all. Most of us have caught ourselves saying word for word some of the things our parents used to say, and which we vowed to ourselves that we would **never ever** say. We catch the thought patterns in the language as well. Once caught, they become habits.

Is it what you want in the long run?

Some of the ways that we have caught to speak with our children undermine the very things that we want for our children as they grow. If we stop and hear what we are saying, and think about what that might encourage in our children, we will probably want to fine tune things a bit.

The journey for the baby is a journey to independence. Independence means learning to use and to trust their own judgement. It means learning to follow the curiosity that arises within, and to enjoy the satisfaction from achieving goals that they set as the 'reward' for their effort. This independence is either encouraged or smothered by the way we adults behave and speak with our children.

A bit of acknowledgement goes a long way

Some of us grew up on "a bit of a starvation diet" in the encouragement department. Feeling that a bit more acknowledgement would have been welcome for us, we endeavour to do that for our children. We want to encourage and acknowledge them. It is a basic human need to be noticed, to be seen. In Africa, a Zulu greeting translates as "I see you. Oh yes, I see you."

Nearly all of the things we say are habits of speech for us. In our culture it has been a habit to comment on **the child** - *who he is*, and not **the action** - *what he does*. That probably means that that is what you do, you will have caught our culture's habit. Making ascriptive statements - commenting on who the child is - has some serious side effects. For the negative statements it can seem pretty obvious:

*"You are a liar" "You are a grizzler" "You can't share can you?" "You are so naughty"
"You are such a pig with your food" "You are a bad boy" "By golly, you are disobedient"*

This little person is forming his image of who he is in this world. Children don't come with a self image, their self image grows from the way they are handled and spoken to. These negative statements build the exact image that parents don't want; children who "know" that they are grizzly or naughty will be grizzly or naughty. They have very little choice because of the way that language works in their subconscious. As Deepak Chopra says,

"Telling a child what he is makes a much deeper impression than telling him what to do. The mind-body system actually organises itself around such verbal experiences, and the wounds delivered in words can create far more permanent effects than physical trauma, for literally we create ourselves out of words."

Sticks and stones may break my bones - but names can be even more dangerous! So instead of insulting our children, we need to develop the habit of describing what is required:

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| Change this | ... | to this |
| <i>"You idiot, you are so clumsy."</i> | ... | "Whoops, everywhere. We'll wipe it up." |
| <i>"You are a grizzler."</i> | ... | "Sounds to me like you could be tired." |
| <i>"You are a naughty boy."</i> | ... | "Your toys go in the box, pop them in please." |
| <i>"You are such a pig with your food."</i> | ... | "Use your spoon for your yoghurt." |
| <i>"You can't share can you?"</i> | ... | "Xena is playing with that. That's hers for now." |
| <i>"You are a liar."</i> | ... | "Saying you did it isn't easy sometimes." |
| <i>"You are so disobedient."</i> | ... | "I asked you to leave it for your sister to eat." |

Oh my word

Making ascriptive statements that are positive is not as damaging as the negative statements, but positive ascriptive statements have negative side effects too. It's just that they aren't so obvious at first glance:

"You are such a good girl" "You are really clever" "You're my favourite helper"

This little person hearing these statements can easily become addicted to what others think of her and she ends up seeking approval for all that she does. She can even end up thinking that her worth depends upon others' opinions of her - which, of course, it doesn't. This "looking to the outside for approval" interferes with her experiencing reward and satisfaction from within when she has chosen and completed a task. And that's where the value of talking about what the child does comes in.

Describe, acknowledge, describe

When you comment on what the child *does*, the child still feels "seen." The deep human need for attention is met. The verbal acknowledgement of the achievement or task helps the child to appreciate exactly what it is that they have achieved. It gives them the words to describe what they have achieved and it also signals what is expected behaviour around your place.

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| <i>"You are such a good girl."</i> | ... | "Thanks, you put that where Baby could reach." |
| <i>"You are really clever."</i> | ... | "You pulled yourself up, good going." |
| <i>"You're my favourite helper."</i> | ... | "I really appreciated your help with the dishes." |
| <i>"You are a genius."</i> | ... | "You did the puzzle all by yourself. It was a tricky one too." |

Changing habits

For most of us, having satisfying relationships with little people (and big people) means we have to ditch some of the patterns of speaking we picked up along the way. Learning to describe what your child does, learning to acknowledge what is happening without judging will be one of the biggest investments you can make in your child's future as a happy and well adjusted human being. It also makes the job of parenting and caring so much easier and enjoyable.