

The Power of Your Language: 5 Tips for Talking to Children about Conflicts

by Carrie Spaulding, CPC

When it comes to helping our children or students navigate conflict, our language is so important. Even when you're not aware of it, children will often pick up on your energy and mirror it. A conflict can easily escalate or de-escalate based on the language a helping adult uses.

When you bring awareness to your language, learn and practice key communication skills, and intentionally choose language that empowers your child, you'll completely transform the way your child experiences and navigates conflict.

Here are five tips to make your communication with children more positively impactful and empowering, even in the most difficult and painful moments.

1. Avoid assumptions and projections—ask questions instead.

We all see situations through our own eyes—we can't help it! When your child tells you about a conflict, ask open-ended questions that draw out your child's perspective as richly as possible. Clear your automatic assumptions and listen to your child with true curiosity. This is an important step if the conflict occurred when you were not present—but it is equally important even if you witnessed the whole event (or think you did). There are almost always elements of which you are unaware. Instead of: "That must have made you feel..." try "How did that make you feel?"

2. Set the expectation of success.

Even when your child can't see a solution in sight (and even when *you* can't, either!), your belief that a solution can be found sends a powerful message. Choose language that conveys your belief that your child can and will handle the situation. Instead of, "Do you think there's anything you can do about it?" try "How will you feel when you've resolved this?"

3. Check for interpretations (your own and your child's!).

Children, like adults, do not automatically consider the whole range of influences on someone else's behavior—and in fact, they sometimes downright can't understand or accept that someone could truly have such a different perspective from their own—or such a different intent from impact. To guide

your child (and yourself) in questioning interpretations, try: “What are some reasons he might have said/done that?” “What else could be going on for her?” “If you were walking inside his shoes, how do you think he would see this situation?”

4. Praise the use of specific life skills.

Even when the conflict is still in the tears-streaming-down-the-face stage, use affirming language to encourage your child’s positive behaviors. To foster the most growth, avoid general praise, and instead comment on the specific life skills your child is displaying: “I’m proud of you for asking for help when you needed it.” “You’re doing a really good job thinking this through.”

Even if your child seems to have been in the wrong, such as by acting unkindly or breaking a rule, you can use affirming words to identify whatever your child is doing right in the moment—no matter how small it is: “I’m impressed with how honest you are being.” “I know you are angry and I see that you’re taking deep breaths to calm yourself down.”

5. Notice and articulate values.

Values drive everything we do. Notice and articulate the values that were challenged in the conflict. This can help both of you to increase your awareness of what’s most important to your child and why he or she might be triggered: “It sounds like when she pushed into you, it made you snap! How important to you is your personal space?” You can also point out values your child is displaying in the moment: “Given how upset you are about what happened, I can tell that being a good friend is really important to you.”

Putting these five tips into practice will make your conversations with your child more fruitful, more insightful, and more productive. Use these strategies as an anchor when you venture into the often tricky territory of helping your child navigate the social playing field!

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