

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

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... your child looks blissfully happy as he's swinging up high. It's "written all over his face."

We love words, it's true. And we want our kids to talk, to talk more, and especially, to talk to us! "Use your words," we remind them. This is fair. But, even more than just using words, we want our kids to *communicate* with words! How do we get there?

This column will help! But we won't start with a list of words kids tend to acquire first, or even the functional words we really do want our kids to learn. Rather, we will focus on what's behind the words *your child* will use first to communicate! You will learn to help your child become a verbal communicator by discovering *which words he wants to say*. How? By watching your child and reading the signs that tell you, "I would be saying, 'That is so cool!' or 'Whooooa!!' if I could." You will learn that "actions speak louder than words" until children acquire *the words that are right – for them!*

As intuitive as it sounds, the words anyone uses ought to be the ones the speaker wants to say! Unless the words we say are the right words – for us – they are like a foreign language, empty words learned without context or personal meaning. We all know how words sound when they don't ring true: hollow, like a clanging cymbal. When body language is in conflict with verbal language, we just don't believe the words. If there's a mismatch, we go with the nonverbal message every time!

"I feel fine," says your friend in a lackluster voice. "What is she trying to hide?" you wonder. "I don't feel good," announces your child with more drama than fatigue, pleading with you to let him stay home from school. "Oh," you reply, cutting to the chase, "then instead of checking out the TV schedule, you'd better march yourself off to bed."

Other aphorisms: A picture's worth a thousand words; seeing is believing. We're not

fooled by empty talk...and neither are our kids. If we teach them "happy" and "sad" without an index of internal feeling, they learn to use the labels, often in the context they learned them, but communicate nothing. "How do you feel?" we ask. "Happy" comes the rote reply, but the nonverbal body language says otherwise. We suffer the delusion that because we teach a child to "use his words" – in this case, "happy" – the child who says it is happy!

Now, let's turn this communication pyramid upside down. Instead of starting with words, let's start with the individual! How does your child feel? How do you know how he feels? How is he communicating that feeling? What are you picking up, noticing, seeing, and hearing that conveys this message? We know communication involves a sender and a receiver. (Refer back to last issue's column for more detail.) So, for instance, your child looks blissfully happy as he's swinging up high. It's "written all over his face." You show him you appreciate his joy by laughing with him, and, by adding a receiver, you've completed a "circle of communication!"

Next you add, "I am sooo happy!" You put words, real words, to your feelings...ones that mirror those of your child! By doing so you bridge from nonverbal communication to verbal communication by mapping language onto feeling and action! You create an entry in your child's dictionary of meaningful words he may begin to use in real life!

Now it's time to apply these principles to your own child! Here's your To Do list:

1. Take some time this next week and watch, really watch, your child. You might do this when someone else is available to play with your child, or better yet, to film your child playing with you. Being an observer

helps you see the moment that usually goes by all too fast. Watch the “pictures” your child projects, and jot down ten different feelings your child communicates nonverbally. What does excited look like? How about contentment? Or confusion? Incredulousness?

2. Identify any ten nonverbal expressions. Looking closely, describe how your child communicates them. Does his body dance in a certain way when he’s surprised and delighted compared with a jerkier flail when he’s surprised and scared? How does his body reflect the difference? Do his eyes “smile” when he’s joyful? What do they look like if his joy turns to over-excitement? What does his face look like just before he emits the cry of meltdown?
3. Let all of this simmer for a week, and watch for these feelings to be expressed again. This time, see if you can reflect them back to your child. (Not when this will heighten a volatile state, however!) Mirror your child, and complete the circle of communication by joining your child in nonverbal communication. Jump and squeal with him in excitement; soften your face and sigh with contentment; drop your jaw and your hands and look at the ceiling during confusion; raise your eyebrows and the pitch of your voice with incredulousness.

4. Then, the following week when one of these feelings is expressed, follow your mirroring with words, or at least sounds. Give voice to what you feel, or see, in one of several ways. You can mix and match your vocal responses, as your authentic reaction dictates.

- If you share the feeling your child is expressing, say so, using kid-friendly words and vocal tone: “I am soooo happy!!” “Cooool!” Say what you think your child would want to say at this moment. If he uses sounds and not words, you might pick words that have incredible sound value: “Wahoo!” “Whew!” “Ahhh!” If your child is enchanted with words from movies or books, pick something he likes to hear: “You can’t get meee!” spoken with more intonation than individual speech sounds.
- If your authentic reaction is more personal to you, choose this moment to comment on what you feel: “You look sooo happy up there!” “I looove swinging with you!”

You are mapping language (beginning with sound) onto nonverbal communication. Your efforts are creating a first dictionary, a very personal one, for your child. Know that even though it may take awhile for your child to use these words or sounds, your honest

acknowledgement and joint participation count for more than you can imagine. Your shared experiences add up, and, over time, your well-chosen words and intonational expressions will become a greater part of those experiences.

5. Finally, you have another avenue for discovering your child’s feelings...his eye gaze! Control of the eyes is often the most reliable motor control a child has, so following your child’s eye gaze opens a window into understanding his reactions. When you notice what he notices, you create a circle of communication. *When he notices that you notice*, true sharing occurs! And if you acknowledge his glance with words, you give it voice. For example, your child looks at the clock; your gaze follows. You smile at him and then you say, “Yeah, you’re right. It’s time for our TV program!” This bridge to shared attention is extremely powerful: it was initiated by your child and understood by you!

You now have a systematic procedure for building communicative success with your child! As you share more and more experiences and feelings with your child, you develop a joint repertoire of nonverbal communication, which will lead to your child’s real, heart-felt, verbal communication! Your child’s communication pyramid will have a solid foundation from which to build his future! ■