



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Using Your Words

"Use your words." It seems like parents are always saying this to their young children. Often, however, we are told that this instruction seems to be unhelpful. We would like to discuss why that might be, and how children can be best assisted to learn to "use your words."

What do we mean by verbalization?: When parents ask children to use their words, they are encouraging them to use language to describe something in their inner world: a need, impulse or feeling, which we will collectively refer to as "internal states." Words have a special role in the emotional and social lives of children. They are like bridges that connect children's current internal state to their past internal states, morals and experiences and to the consequences of their actions. These connections enable children to make good judgments and decisions, because they are able to balance many factors when words bring these factors together. Verbalization can occur completely inside children in the form of thoughts, or it can be expressed through speech. Speech, in turn, creates bridges or connections between people and provides communication that leads to strong relationships.

Why is it so hard for children to use their words?: Learning to "use words," in the sense that we are referring to it, is a lengthy process involving several steps. First, children must recognize that they are having an internal experience. Then, they must identify or distinguish the nature of that internal experience. Finally, they must possess adequate words — the vocabulary — to describe the internal experience.

Recognizing an internal experience: Throughout childhood, children

benefit from continued help recognizing that many experiences originally felt in the body may be transformed into experiences within the mind: an internal state. This process is known as "mentalizing." Parents begin helping children identify internal states in infancy. Here's an example:

Three-month-old Lori wiggled and giggled. Lori's mother smiled, wiggled her own body, and said, "There is my happy girl." Lori's mother was using words to identify Lori's inside feeling. Her imitation of Lori's movements was also a helpful way of showing Lori that her experience in her body could also be felt as the internal state we call happiness.

Distinguishing internal states: Once children are able to recognize the presence of an internal state, they begin learning to identify and distinguish that state. For example, they distinguish between hunger and thirst or frustration and anger. Although infants develop the capacity to make some distinctions, the real growth in this area occurs around age 1 or 2.

Two-year-old Miku was tired and cranky. She was trying to put a puzzle together. When the pieces did not go quickly into place, she threw them. Her mother said, "Miku, I know that you are angry at the puzzle, but we don't throw puzzles. Say, 'I am angry; help me, Mommy,' and I will help you with the puzzle."

Although being tired was a factor, Miku actually threw the puzzle because she was angry. Miku's mother assisted her in her task of learning to distinguish between tiredness and anger.

Using words to describe emotions: As parents are helping their children to differentiate between their emotional experiences, they can encourage the children to describe these experiences with words, like Miku's mother did. Children can also be encouraged to look inside, find their feelings and describe them with words, too.

Three-year-old Margaret loved the family dog Snuffy. On one occasion, Snuffy jumped and knocked Margaret down. Margaret clenched her fist as she chased Snuffy. Believing that Margaret recognized that she was angry, Margaret's mother said to her, "Margaret, don't hurt Snuffy. You can use an angry voice and say, 'No, Snuffy, don't jump. I don't like that.'

He'll get the idea."

Margaret's mother saw an opportunity to help Margaret use her words to channel her inner state into mentalizing and words — and away from physical expression and discharge.

Role modeling is helpful: Parents can also help by being models that help children make sense of internal states by clearly conveying their own internal states, within the confines of what is appropriate for children to know. Parental openness and honesty about the feelings that they are having helps children identify their own linkages between emotion and behavior.

Neil's mother raised her voice while setting limits with her 2- year old son. "Neil, I am getting irritated with you because you're not doing as I asked," she said. Neil's mother helped Neil make sense of her raised voice by explaining it in terms of the emotion that it expressed (irritation) and the reason for the emotion (Neil's lack of compliance). Neil's mother did not explain her raised voice as "frustration," which is much less specific, not entirely accurate, and would have avoided acknowledging irritation or anger.

Children and situations are different: Children vary in their ability to verbalize emotions, needs and impulses — from child to child and from situation to situation. Therefore, it's important for parents to determine which step in the process the child needs help with, whether it is recognizing, identifying or describing. We recommend that parents encourage their children to apply words to a variety of inner states and praise their successful efforts. Encouragement to use words should not be associated just with situations of undesirable behavior, because communicating inner states can become associated with times of problems rather than being understood as an essential way to feel good and be successful in the world.

Learning to “use your words” is a lifelong process. When parents keep providing help, understand that children’s capacity to use words is a hard-won and slowly achieved capacity, and praise their successful efforts, and children become effective communicator to themselves and to others.