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Resistance words to avoid when talking to kids

- **BEHAVIOUR**



by Michael Grose

Our choice of words when communicating with kids makes a huge difference when trying to get their co-operation. The more we push a child who is resistant, the more likely they are to push back and display greater opposition.

Sometimes one word can cause a child to fold their arms and thrust out their jaw in ‘you-can’t make-me’ defiance. Let’s take a look at some words that invite resistance, especially from strong-willed children who like to have their own way.

Resistance words

- Must – for example “You must be on time!”
- Never – for example “You should never be rude to your teacher.”
- Always – for example “You should always clean your teeth before bed.”
- You – for example “You need to go to bed now!”
- Don’t – for example “Don’t yell at your brother.”

Why they invite resistance

‘Must’, ‘Never’ and ‘Always’ are absolute terms. They cannot be modified in any way. Absolute terms invite resistance from children and young people who do not like to be told what to do. Strong-willed children and young people often view these terms as open invitations to resist. If you have more than one child there is a good chance you have one of these children. If you were to say “You must be nice to your brother”, a young resister thinks “We’ll see about that”.

Healthy alternatives

To help with this, you can replace absolute terms with more moderate alternatives that don’t back a child into a corner. For example:

- Try “Please be on time” rather than “You must be on time.”
- Try “It’s best to be polite to your teacher” rather than “You should never be rude to your teacher.”

- Try “Clean your teeth before bed” rather “You should always clean your teeth before bed.”

Let them know what you will do

Many children do not like to be told what they should do. They like to think they are calling the shots. These children are not misbehaving – they just want to feel that they are in control. Which means sometimes, their instinct to resist becomes greater than their desire to follow. Instead of telling your child what to do, let your child know what you will do. It’s a subtle but powerful shift. For example:

- Try “I’m saying good night now” rather than “Go to bed now.”
- Try “I’ll put the meal on the table when it’s set” rather than “Set the table!”
- Try “I’m driving you to school at 8.30” rather than “Get ready by 8.30.”

You need to follow through if this is to be an effective use of language.

Avoid ending an instruction on a negative

Ending an instruction on a negative only drives the negative behaviour deeper into the sub-conscious mind of your child. Saying “Don’t yell at your brother” will ensure that your child will keep yelling again and again. Instead, say the behaviour you’d like in positive terms. For example say: “Speak quietly to your brother” rather than “Don’t yell at your brother.” If you can’t eradicate “Don’t” then develop the habit of ending on a positive. For example: “Don’t yell at your brother. Speak quietly.”

Words matter

Your choice of words makes a huge difference in terms of getting co-operation from more challenging kids.

Of course, some parents believe that their kids should always do as they say, so their language is peppered with absolutes and negatives. This invites resistance and can lead to an ongoing battle between parents and children. If this is the case, then maybe the language you use could benefit from a little tweak.