

A New Language to Bring Out the Best in Our Children

Language has great power to shape character and culture. Our choice of words and the way we use them can motivate and empower our children or humiliate and demotivate them. Sometimes when parents get frustrated with a certain misbehaviour of a child and feel powerless to change it, they give a hurtful label to the child to force him to correct his ways. For example a two year old who insists on exercising his new found will may get the label of 'stubborn' or a little boy who may not feel ready to come down a steep slide can get the label of 'coward'. These labels are often given by parents in attempt to explain the behaviour to others or make the child to correct it. However, data indicates that labelling and shaming far from correcting the behaviour, actually helps reinforce the negative identity. Children assume the identity of the given labels and often carry its heavy burden on their minds and hearts into their adulthood resulting in low self-esteem, isolation and low self-confidence. The parent's intention, in reality, is for the child to show certain desirable qualities, such as flexibility and courage in the above examples. How can we change our ways of communication to achieve this goal?

The Language of Virtues developed by Linda and Dan Popov, described *in the Family Virtues Guide*, provides an effective and gentle alternative for family communication. Using this language has proven to result in strengthening the virtues in children and deepening the bonds of unity and understanding among family members.

Learning to speak this kind of language is like learning a new language; it needs regular practice for the new phrases to become familiar and then second nature. Sharing experiences and progress will create a supportive network to increase skill-building. We can use the language of virtues in three types of situations to help the growth of children's character. These are situations where we **acknowledge, correct, or guide** the child. To get started, we can consider the basic structure of these statements as having three essential parts:

- an opening,
- a virtue, and
- how the virtue is being shown or needs to be shown.

To Acknowledge: Children have a natural inclination to respond to encouragement. We can be encouraging in positive or negative ways, and our encouragement focus directs the children's attention. When a child shows patience waiting for his turn, saying, "That was patient." places his focus on the virtue being used. We can deepen his understanding and growth of the virtues by specifying its application: "You were patient when you waited for your turn." This acknowledgement not only helps the child who is being; it also encourages and educates the siblings or classmates seeing the action and hearing the acknowledgment. Later as the child grows, we can help extend this

understanding of patience. For example, "I noticed your patience when you were trying to finish your art project and the glue gun was not working."

Here are some more examples for acknowledging virtues in children:

- I see your perseverance in learning your times tables
- Thank you for your reliability to pass my message accurately to Daddy.
- What wonderful friendliness you showed our visitors!
- You two showed great unity when working together to clean your room

Opening phrases such as , "That was, That is, I saw, I noticed, When you" are simpler and easier to use with children, especially young children, for example: When you include John in your game, that showed friendliness

Even after the learning has become second nature, there are times when acknowledgement is still called for. It may no longer be necessary to give acknowledgment to encourage growth, rather to give acknowledgment to maintain the strength of that virtue within the child through appreciation and gratitude.

To Correct: Making mistakes is an essential part of our growth. Mistakes can be very powerful moments of learning, particularly when viewed with deep love and respectful dignity. When correcting, we draw attention to the virtue that needs to be practiced by saying, for example, "You need to be respectful and stay silent when others are speaking." This is an effective way to simply call the child to practice the needed virtue of respect rather than labelling or shaming her.

As children become familiar with speaking the language of the virtues they will be able to correct themselves, and develop the life skill of self-learning. They will be able to talk to themselves for example, "I needed to use patience when waiting my turn, and then I would have helped keep things peaceful."

Here are some more examples of corrections:

- When you give generously, it means you do not expect anything in return
- What can you do to remind yourself to be responsible with doing your homework?
- What was the trustworthy thing to do when you borrowed your friend's toy?
- You need to be peaceful now. Please sit down and be quiet.

Sometimes it is useful to use a stronger approach and start with the virtues definition, such as: Tactfulness is thinking before you speak. I would like you to stop and think about how your words might affect your friends before you speak them.

To Guide: We can be proactive in developing virtues in our children by anticipating situations when a virtue can be practiced beforehand and preparing the children for this. For example, "I will be working this morning. When I am

working, you need to be peaceful so I can concentrate and finish quickly.” With more understanding of virtues, children can take part in the preparation. For example, if you are going to have visitors, you can say to your six year old: “We will need to show friendliness and hospitality to our guests. What do you think we can do to help them feel welcome?” This will help children to develop the habit of be self-preparation for situations they anticipate to be challenging. The following are more examples of using the language of virtues to guide.

- What would cooperation look like as we set up our home for tonight’s party?
- How would you practice self-discipline while I decorate the cake?
- I need your honesty when you each describe what happened.

As we persevere in using language of the virtues in our homes and schools, we cultivate a culture of character where learning and growth in virtues is valued and appreciated. Family members soon develop the habit of acknowledging growth in virtues in each other and using respectful ways to correct and guide one another. The atmosphere of the home becomes more joyful and the family members feel more united.

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