



Mind your

Michael Jones passes on his tips for enabling your staff to use language with more care and precision so they can model effective communication with the children and increase the children's word power

Picture the scene: Michael Jones is visiting a nursery in his capacity as advisory teacher for children with speech and language difficulties. He has gathered a small group of young children around him and they are sitting on the floor, deeply involved in a fun listening activity.

Enter four-year-old Steven. He runs up to a small sofa nearby, and starts jumping up and down on it.

Just communicate

Michael (smiling at Steven): *You wouldn't do that at home would you?*

Steven: *Yes I do. My mummy lets me!*

Michael (frowning): *That's a bit cheeky. Can't you see that we are trying to listen here?*

Steven (still bouncing): *Yes I can!*

Michael (with a 'cross' voice and facial expression): *Well stop it then.*

Steven: *No!*

(Enter nursery manager, Lucy)

Lucy: *Is everything all right Michael?*

Michael: *I'm not getting through to Steven. Please can you help?*

Lucy (to Steven): *Steven, in nursery we sit on the sofa and jump up and down outside. Do you want to sit or jump?*

Steven: *Jump.*

Lucy: *Well off you go outside and jump.* (Exit Steven)

Getting it right

This important lesson in how to talk effectively with children took place 10 years ago, and I have never forgotten it. Lucy was an experienced manager who believed

in creating what would now be called a 'communication friendly environment', where practitioners maximised opportunities to develop children's language, social development and wellbeing. The key element of this nursery's success lay in the way that the staff spoke with children. This included how the adults communicated with children like Steven, who needed support to develop positive behaviour.

I discussed this incident in depth with Lucy, because I could see that she had effortlessly helped me work out exactly where I was going wrong with Steven. By modelling appropriate language she had shown me:

- how I might go about improving my communication
- the standard of behaviour and accuracy of language she expected from me when I visited the nursery.

Modelling language

Lucy described how she uses modelling of her own behaviour and language to set a standard for all staff in the setting:

"I can tell colleagues what to do, but it's much better for them to see me do it. If a staff member is having difficulties with children's behaviour, it is often because what they say to the children is confusing. In your case, Michael, I knew that you would change your behaviour because you could see that you weren't getting through to Steven, and that meant you were open to change."

"But what about practitioners who don't realise the negative impact their actions and words are having on children's behaviour?"

"In those cases I might ask a senior member of staff to work alongside the colleague and model appropriate language. If this doesn't work, then I will meet with the staff member and talk through what the agreed standards for talk in our setting are. Importantly, I let them know why what they say has such a key influence on language, learning and behaviour."

"Agreed standards?"

"Yes. We have found that the best way to influence children's language and learning is to use every conversation as a chance to improve the children's understanding and expressive language. This includes how we let children know what we want them to do."

Children in this setting made excellent progress with language development. One of the reasons for this was that Lucy led the practitioners in working hard to improve the accuracy of the adults' own vocabulary when talking with children.

Get it right!

For example, it was observed that many children needed support to learn what items of clothing were called. Lucy noted that many parents and practitioners were not at all accurate when they were talking to children. A classic example might be when a practitioner was helping a child get changed after she had got very wet. The adult might say, "Let's change

language

Below: Children and adults in this setting can explore deep thinking and learning when adults use clear messages

your coat, and your top and your shoes," when what the child was actually wearing a jacket, a cardigan and a pair of trainers.

Lucy asked me to support the staff so they could grasp the importance of their everyday use of language. I led a staff meeting where we discussed the problem and planned activities to improve what we called the children's 'word power'.

Five for one

What we did was implement a scheme that we called 'Five for One'. If we knew that a child could say 'apple' then we planned, through activities and everyday interaction, to introduce him to five other fruits to see how long he would take to learn and use their names. If a child knew 'top' then we introduced 'fleece', 'cardigan', 'jumper', 'sweatshirt' and 'hoody top'.

The staff turned their role play area into a clothes shop and created a display that showed children what various clothes are called in English. The impact of this work with the children was to improve adults' accuracy of language, which had a direct and immediate impact on the children's understanding and expressive vocabularies.

Result? The practitioners were impressed that their everyday talk could have such speedy results, which raised their confidence.

A richer language

Another approach was to set a standard for how practitioners greeted parents and children. The nursery is in a part of the UK where a strong regional dialect is used in the community. Practitioners would typically greet parents and children with 'Hi. Y'arright there?'

While there is nothing wrong with using a regional dialect in social settings, more standard English should be used with children in settings and school, as it enriches the children's language. Not only that, but it introduces them to the



important idea that there are different ways of speaking with different people, while enriching their language.

So Linda modelled, through her own greetings, that she expected practitioners to reduce the amount of local dialect they used with the children, and instead, think of using phrases such as 'Good morning. How are you today?'

Greetings!

Linda led staff meetings where she explained and illustrated how avoiding dialect gives children a richer language experience. Likewise, staff who addressed

groups of children with 'Hi, guys' or 'Listen up, guys!' were encouraged, through modelling and staff meetings and individual discussion, to use phrases such as 'Hello, children. Everyone listen please.' The children were then growing up hearing and using the type of language that they would hear and be able to relate to in school.

All these approaches - modelling, meeting as a team to plan how to address this issue, individual discussion and practical projects with the children - had a significant impact on the children's language and learning. They didn't cost anything either! ■

- Michael Jones has a background in speech and language therapy and teaching, and works as a freelance trainer on young children's communication and language. For details of Michael's training and practical information about language development, visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk

Connect with Michael on LinkedIn

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