

How to Be Clear with Your Words

A CLEAR MESSAGE BEGINS with our words, and most often, that's where communication breaks down because we say or do more than is needed. Anger, drama, and strong emotion can easily sabotage the clarity of our message and reduce the likelihood of cooperation. It's not only what we say that matters; it's how we say it. Our words are an important guidance tool.

This chapter will show you how to use your words in the clearest and most understandable way. By following a few simple guidelines, you'll learn how to give your aggressive researchers all the information they need to make an acceptable choice and cooperate from the beginning.

Guidelines for Giving Clear Messages

THE KEY TO giving a clear message with your words is to say only what needs to be said in a clear, firm, and respectful manner. The following tips will help you get started.

1. Keep the focus of your message on behavior.

Keep the focus of your message on what you want the child to do or stop doing, not on attitude or feelings or the worth of the child. Remember, our goal is to reject unacceptable behavior, not the child performing the behavior. Messages that shame, blame, criticize, or humiliate go too far. They reject the child along with the behavior and obscure the clarity of the guidance message. The focus is misdirected. A clear behavioral message is less likely to be perceived as a personal attack.

For example, if you want Sharon, a tenth grader, to stop talking during your lesson, your message should be "Sharon you can talk with your friends during lunch or after class but not now." Your message should not be, "Sharon, do you have to be so annoying?" or "Why are you being so rude?" or "Would you like it if I interrupted you while you were trying to teach?"

2. Be direct and specific.

A clear message should inform children, directly and specifically, about what you want them to do. If necessary, be prepared to tell them how and when you want them to do it. The fewer the words, the better.

For example, if you want Kyle, age nine, to clean up his desk before he leaves for home, your message should be, "Kyle, pick up thoroughly around your desk before you leave. That means picking up all the crayons, pencils, or any other items that are on the floor, and putting away all your books and papers. If that's not finished, you won't be ready to go."

Avoid indirect unclear messages such as "I hope you do a better job picking up around your desk today." What is "a better job"? And who decides? You or Kyle? What happens if your definition is different from his? Without a direct and specific message, Kyle's performance will probably fall short of your expectations.

3. Use your normal voice.

The tone of your voice is important. Your normal voice expresses control, whereas your raised voice sends the opposite message—loss of control. Your tone should convey that you are firm, in control, and resolute in your expectations that the children do what you've asked. The best way to communicate this expectation is simply to state your message matter-of-factly in your normal voice.

Firm limits are not stated harshly. There is no need to yell, scream, or raise your voice to convince children that you really mean what you say. Your actions will convey your resolve more powerfully than words.

Maintaining a matter-of-fact attitude in guidance situations is easy for some teachers, but not for others—particularly those who grew up in homes where yelling, screaming, and angry dances were commonplace. The urge to yell becomes a deeply ingrained habit and a nearly automatic response in conflict situations. These old habits won't disappear overnight just because you're inspired to do things differently. You have to work at it. Managing anger is a skill you can learn; but like most skills, the learning process requires time, patience, and lots of practice. The more you practice, the faster your new skills will improve.

4. Specify the consequences for noncompliance.

Remember, strong-willed children want to know the bottom line or how far they can go when they decide to test or resist your rules. When you ask them to stop misbehaving, they ask themselves, "Or what? What are you going to do if I don't?" Teachers can prevent a lot of testing and power struggles by providing students with all the information they need to make acceptable choices from the beginning.

If you expect a student to test, tell him, in your normal voice, what will happen if he doesn't cooperate. This isn't a

threat. You're just being clear by giving your aggressive researcher all of the information he needs to make an acceptable choice to cooperate.

For example, if you ask Larry, a second grader, to put away his Silly Putty during class, but you expect him to test, your message should be, "Larry, put away the Silly Putty, please. If you have it out during class again, I'll have to keep it in my desk until the next parent-teacher conference."

Now, Larry has all the information he needs to make an acceptable choice. He may still decide to test, but if he does, all

you have to do is follow through with your action step and take the Silly Putty away. Larry will learn you mean what you say.

5. Support your words with effective action.

Your words are only the first part of your total message. In many cases, your words will be all you'll need, but even the clearest verbal message will be ineffective if you fail to support your words with effective action. Be prepared to follow through.

Examples of Effective Verbal Messages (Firm Limits)

"Stop pushing now."

"It's not okay to interrupt."

"I expect you back in five minutes."

"If you wipe the glue stick on others, I'll have to take it away."

"You can play by the rules or find another game to play."

Teachers can prevent a lot of testing and power struggles by providing students with all the information they need to make acceptable choices from the beginning.

“If you shove, you’ll have to go to the back of the line.”

“You won’t be ready to leave until your desk is clean.”

Examples of Effective Action Messages (Firm Limits)

Using a time-out consequence for persistent disruption

Removing a toy from a child who does not put it away when asked

Revoking a play privilege temporarily for failing to play by the rules

Separating a child from others for misbehaving in the cafeteria

Temporarily removing a privilege for abusing that privilege

Holding students accountable for cleaning up their own messes

Chapter Summary

A CLEAR MESSAGE begins with your words, and most often, that’s where communication breaks down. Anger, drama, and strong emotion can easily sabotage the clarity and meaning of your message. A clear message is not harsh, and it’s not a lecture. You don’t need a lot of words, and you don’t need drama or strong emotion to show that you mean what you say. You only need to be clear.

Your guidance message should focus on behavior, not on attitude or feelings. It should be specific and direct, stated in a matter-of-fact manner, and it should specify the consequences for noncompliance so the student has all the information he or she needs to make an acceptable choice to cooperate. Clear guidance messages reduce testing and dances and set up instructive learning experiences.

Stopping Power Struggles Before They Begin

IF TUNING OUT were an Olympic event, nine-year-old Travis would be a gold medal contender. He knows how to ignore directions better than any student in his class, and he can hook almost any teacher into a power struggle. Once he hooks them, he’s a master at wearing them down with arguments and debates. Travis has perfected his skills with years of practice at home.

What Travis doesn’t realize is that his current teacher has figured out his game. She read a book about classroom dances and recognizes his tactics for what they are. She’s ready to stop his dances before they begin. She gets her chance the next day.

When Travis is supposed to be working at his seat, he gets up, walks to the back of the room, and turns on the computer. Then, he begins playing a game.

“Travis, you need to finish your paragraphs before you’re ready for computer time,” says his teacher. Travis doesn’t respond. He continues playing.