



WHAT WE

SAY

AND

HOW WE SAY IT

MATTERS!

By Linda Murphy, MS, CCC-SLP

Speaking style is a powerful tool that teachers, parents, and caregivers can use to support social success and positive engagement for kids with social communication challenges. When speaking to children who are struggling in these areas, many people tend to use language that is directive or demand based. For example, they may ask questions with right or wrong answers (e.g., *What color is your shirt?*) or they may deliver specific directions (e.g., *Put on your shoes*), which, when not followed, become viewed as non-compliance.

There is a better way! It is called *Declarative Language*.

The benefits of declarative language use

- Declarative language helps individuals feel comfortable because it is inviting in nature, rather than demand based. Many kids with vulnerable language or social communication abilities shy away when faced with interactions that are based in questions or commands, making social engagement and interactions harder to establish and

sustain. In contrast, consistent use of declarative language leads to more open, positive engagements. When kids trust there will be no demands, they turn towards others rather than away.

- Declarative language helps to develop inferential thinking. It does not tell children what to do but helps them to know what may be important to notice, so that they can then draw important conclusions on their own.
- Declarative language leaves room for children to take action, thereby encouraging spontaneity and independence.
- Declarative language helps develop curiosity, as it plants seeds of wonder in the minds of others.
- Declarative language supports problem solving because it emphasizes and spotlights the *process* of problem solving, over getting the right answer.
- Declarative language creates authentic reasons for social interaction, as it helps kids notice and think about others within naturally occurring opportunities.
- Declarative language is an effective strategy for most language learners

and communicators, including those struggling with executive function, subtle social communication difficulties, and more concrete learners.

- Declarative language can be used across environments and communication partners and is the perfect tool for in the moment teaching.

What is declarative language?

With declarative language, one is essentially making statements, and thinking out loud for the child to hear. It supports everyone, kids *and* adults, to slow down and become better observers of their environment and other people, and to take note of those moments when a decision needs to be made. As children hear declarative language, they benefit from these models and over time start to communicate in this manner as well.

Declarative language helps communication move away from being product focused and move towards an appreciation that there is a process behind all decisions and actions. It allows everyone to be present in moments that are less certain and move away from the feeling that

something must be done quickly, simply to get it done. As children with social communication challenges become more comfortable in moments that they feel less certain, or less sure of themselves, the fight/flight responses they typically experience will decrease.

The nuts and bolts of declarative statements

Declarative language is:

- *commenting*, or making statements, out loud about what you think, notice, remember, feel, wonder about, observe, etc.
- *flexible*. It allows for more than one possible way to respond. Often you may not even realize this until the child responds in a way that is different from what you were expecting, yet still completely acceptable to the situation!

Declarative language may include:

- cognitive verbs, or verbs that talk about your thinking process such as *think, wonder, know, remember, forget, decide, and imagine*.
- observational words related to your senses such as *notice, hear, see, smell and feel*.
- words or phrases that communicate emotion such as *I'm not sure, I like, I don't like, I feel happy, silly, excited, afraid, nervous, embarrassed, or upset*.
- first person pronouns such as *I, we or us*.
- words of uncertainty or possibility such as *maybe, might, possibly, perhaps and sometimes*.

Declarative language is NOT:

- questions or commands that have a specific right and wrong answer.
- demanding. With declarative language, you make a statement that invites a response, but does not require, or demand, it.

Here are some examples to get you started:

I'm wondering where your shoes are.
I notice your clothes did not make it into the hamper!
The dog looks hungry.
We might need some forks.

I heard your friend say that she wants to use the red crayon when you are done.
I notice that you really like that swing.
I forget what you said you wanted for lunch.

I notice it is almost time to change classes.
I see the other students are starting to pack up their belongings.

I just remembered that we need milk for this recipe.

I would love some help carrying this bag.
I realized both you and your classmate like Legos!

I didn't like when that happened. It made me feel a little nervous.

It made me happy when you said you like playing with me.

Those flowers are really colorful!

Final Words

Shifting to a declarative speaking style can be hard work at first. It requires you to slow down and be more thoughtful when communicating with kids moment to moment, which can be challenging in today's world. However, if you keep in mind the future goal that matters: *helping children to become independent individuals who can problem solve, connect with others, and be thoughtful in their own decision making, it truly is worth the effort.* ■

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