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Empowering Yourself with Words

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“You’re *always* ... [uncooperative]!”
“You *never* ... [pick up your clothes].”
“You *make* me ... [furious].”

How many times a day do you find yourself saying or thinking these kinds of things about your kids? Or these kinds of things about yourself:

“I *should* ... [be folding the piles of laundry right now].”
“I *have* to ... [drive soccer carpool, again].”

These are examples of what communication experts call disempowering language: negative thoughts or words we may take for granted as part of our everyday vernacular. It’s a type of language that leave us feeling more like pawns in someone else’s game, rather than masters of our own destiny. Often when we use disempowering language, it’s a direct reflection of disempowered feelings we may have, which commonly arise under stress. Although the statements above might seem innocuous, disempowering language can have a profound effect on the feelings and behaviors of our children and ourselves.



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Words matter

Did you notice a slight loss of energy or increased discomfort while reading the phrases above? The way we express ourselves – our choice of words and our tone of voice – creates energy that either gives power or takes power away. According to Julia Penelope, author of “Speaking Freely,” speech fundamentally changes perception: “When we speak,” she observes, “We exercise the power of language to transform reality.”

Because of its power to influence our beliefs, disempowering language can undermine our parenting goals. This happens because what we focus on determines most of what we see. For example, when a

parent says to a child, “You’re always uncooperative,” parent and child log the comments as “data.” With repetition, this cycle of behavior and response reinforces in our mind and the child’s the belief that she’s uncooperative, although that is far from our goal.

Focus on the positive

You may be thinking, “But, my child doesn’t cooperate/pick up his clothes/listen to me!” Although this may often be the case, there are also many times when he does cooperate, pick up and listen. When we use disempowering language, we are not open to receiving this information. Negative thoughts narrow our minds and cut off other options and possibilities, preventing us from noticing or remembering our children’s cooperative moments.

It’s similar to playing the game Eye Spy. When you’re looking for purple things, you don’t notice all the green around you. The mind likes validation and consistency. It wants to be right. If we want to see positive results, we need to focus our words and our attention on the positive.

Choose empowering language

Empowering language can make any situation more tolerable and enjoyable. According to Barbara Frederickson, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of “Love 2.0: Finding Happiness and Health in Moments of Connection,” positive thoughts and language do the opposite of negative ones; they “broaden and build” possibilities and open our minds, allowing us to recognize proactive behaviors and view ourselves and others in more positive ways.

Here are some tips for using empowering language:

1. Speak from a place of choice by avoiding “Should,” “Have to,” and “Need to”

These words imply lack of freedom or choice. “I should be doing the laundry,” implies what you *are* doing is either not in your control or not worthwhile. Instead, use “I could,” “I choose,” or “It’s important for me to.” This wording shifts your energy and power. “I *could* be doing laundry, and I’m *choosing* to take a walk,” honors your values and puts you back in control of your choices. When you use this language with children, it creates a sense of their power and responsibility (i.e. “You could do homework now, or before dinner, you choose”). It actually feels light yet strong, decisive and confident.

2. Stay connected to reality by avoiding “Never” and “Always”

These words encourage awfulizing and catastrophizing. Statements such as “You never listen to me!” result from our brains cherry-picking data while trying to be right. Using alternative words, such as “sometimes,” “often,” or “seldom” tethers us to reality. When we think “My son is seldom cooperative with me, and he’s often responsive with his soccer coach,” we reframe reality and free our minds to notice positive behaviors we want to cultivate in our children.

3. Assert confidence and self-control by avoiding “Can’t”

Saying “I *can’t* take you to the park now” implies lack of confidence and self-control. This is especially helpful to notice when setting limits with children. When we say instead, “I’m doing chores this afternoon. I’m willing to take you tomorrow,” we place value on family order, personal priorities and our time. It also leaves room for others to be responsible for what to do next. It’s 12

Make a Shift

Empowering language can supply us with the strength and motivation we need in our evolving role as parents. Even more importantly, this mode of communication gives our children the gifts of confidence and self-trust that will help them learn and grow in a world of possibility.

Disempowering

- I should/You should
- I have to
- I need to
- Always/Never
- I can't

Empowering

- I could/You could
- I choose to
- It's important to me to
- Seldom/Sometimes/Often
- I'm not willing to do/I am willing to do

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