



# mind your language

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**Y**our birth mother could not look after any baby', has a very different feel to 'your birth mother could not look after you'.

My remark when speaking to a group of adopters recently was, for some, their biggest aha of the evening. Language is powerful. Despite its ability to heal or hurt, destroy or create, confuse or clarify, connect or separate, frustrate or enlighten, calm or aggravate: we toss words around like confetti on a windy day.

## General v specific v neutralising

The generalisation of 'any' rather than the specific 'you', shifts the focus from the baby's situation to the adult's capabilities. It transforms perceptions of an experience. It allows a child to see he was not a bad baby (shame generating) but an innocent with deeply inadequate parents. He did not cause the neglect or abuse. Responsibility lay with the adults who failed to protect him. It was not his fault. That transformation generated by changing one word.

## Message sent ≠ message received

How many times have you heard someone say 'that's not what I meant'? An inconvenient truth is that (to use an NLP presupposition): 'the meaning of a communication is the response it elicits'. Where did the message land? How was it received? What was heard? How did the listener respond? Is the broadcaster on the same wavelength as the receiver?

Frequently the message sent is not the message delivered. The receiver processes data unconsciously; running his own filters, focusing on some bits and not noticing others. He is not intentionally misinterpreting or deliberately ignoring. However, that's how it might look to the speaker.

A good communicator steps into the shoes of the recipient and wonders: *what does this person know, how do they think, what matters to them, what stops them hearing? How can I best get this message across? When preparing a presentation I wonder; 'what would offend this audience, what do I presume they already know, how open are they to this message, what are their expectations, how can I create rapport with them?*

If only I were so thoughtful in all my conversations! A carefully considered response rather than unedited words cascading from my lips would be better. Possibly, at tricky times a prepared phrase, well rehearsed, might generate a preferable response. How many of us do that with our children? How many of us plan how we will behave or respond in certain scenarios? Should we?

## Planning beats improvisation

When dealing with children, an outstanding communicator will consider the child's level of functioning, their emotional age, their processing ability, their capacity to hold information in their mind while performing another task, their executive functioning skills, their level of tiredness, amongst other things. If that adult (whether teacher, parent, therapist etc) had previously thought it through, the outcome might be

different. Remember: the meaning of a communication is the response it elicits. BTW: the best seller 'How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk' by Faber and Mazlish is invaluable.

## Subordination conjunctions

One particular challenge for our kids are 'Subordination Conjunctions'; i.e. a word or phrase (e.g. when, since, after, before, until, while, once, as soon as, as) which connects an event or action to a point in time. Such as:

1. Before you go out to play, put your coat on
2. You can't go cycling until after lunch.
3. As soon as you've finished your homework you can get a biscuit
4. As it's raining you can watch TV, then turn it off when Gran arrives.
5. Since you didn't tidy your toys you can't play with your Xbox after tea.

Each phrase requires the listener to do some mental rearranging and put tasks in the correct sequence before taking action. Phrases 2 and 5 include negatives which further heighten confusion. Young children and many older ones with limited executive functioning skills, can't process such instructions and 'disobey'. Consequently shame and stress levels rise, emotional regulation skills plummet, and before you know it, they are, technically speaking, 'off on one'.

Traumatised children frequently struggle with time and sequencing. We must help them with transparent instructions, diagrams, simple language and modeling appropriate behaviour. So, alternative instructions might be:

1. Put your coat on (show or help).  
Now you can go out to play.
2. First lunch. Second cycling.
3. Let's do the homework together.
4. TV until 5.30 (when the big hand is on the 6).
5. Let's tidy your toys together.

## No negatives

Don't think of a blue tree. Gotcha. The brain can't think in negatives. It has to go there (visualise blue tree) before stopping doing it. So keep instructions positive.

Don't cross the road = stop at the kerb

Don't jump on the sofa = both feet on the floor

Don't shout = indoor voice, please

Don't forget = remember

Stop talking = quiet now

So catch yourself, think ahead, be positive, watch your words and mind your language. ●

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