
Establishing Positive Verbal Environments:

Strategies for promoting social
development through positive guidance

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The verbal environment

As social creatures, we all interact with each other in an environment that we create together through our communication. Positive, nurturing interactions over time lead to a more positive self esteem. Negative verbal environments are ones in which children feel unworthy, unlovable, insignificant, or incompetent because of what adults say or do. "Adult participants in the early childhood setting create the verbal environment. Its components include words and silence - how much adults say, what they say, how they speak, to whom they talk and how well they listen. The manner in which these elements are enacted dictates children's estimations of self worth." (Kostelnik, Stein, & Whiren, 1988). This document contains 20 hands-on tips for fostering positive verbal environments in early childhood classrooms.

1. Greet Each Child

Each child feels special and wanted when adults warmly welcome them to the classroom each day. Take a moment each day to greet each child by name and devote full attention to the child.

2. Be actively engaged

Show active engagement by getting down on the children's level. Move to close proximity with the child. Be interested and involved in children's play, but follow rather than lead.

3. Show interest

Use words to show children you are interested in them and their activities. One strategy for showing interest is behavior reflections. The primary benefit of using behavior reflections is to demonstrate to the child that you are paying attention. They are also a useful way to make sure yourself that you are actively paying attention to children's activities. A secondary benefit is that behavior reflections can introduce young children to new vocabulary words. Behavior reflections are appropriate for use with toddlers, preschoolers, and early elementary school age students.

To Formulate behavior reflections:

- Describe some aspect of the child's person or behavior in a statement to the child.
- Phrase behavior reflections as statements.
- Address behavior reflections directly to children.
- Use descriptive vocabulary as part of your reflection.
- Use nonjudgmental vocabulary when reflecting children's behavior.
- Behavior reflections should be simple yet descriptive.

Adults should label objects and events - help children become aware of characteristics and concepts in the environment such as color, size, shape, etc.

4. Actively listen to children

Children feel valued when adults pay attention to what they are saying. One strategy for active listening is paraphrase reflections. Paraphrase reflections require the listener to summarize what the speaker is saying by putting the message in to their own words. As with behavior reflections, paraphrase reflections also are a useful tool for adults to ensure they are paying attention to what children are saying. Paraphrase reflections are appropriate for toddlers, preschoolers, and older children.

To formulate paraphrase reflections:

- Listen actively to the child's words.
- Restate in your own words what the child has said.
- Rephrase erroneous reflections.
- Match your reflection to each child's ability to understand language.
- Use a conversational tone when reflecting.
- Summarize children's actions and words rather than reflect each individual behavior or idea expressed.
- Select one idea at a time to paraphrase from the many a child may express.
- Add interest to your reflections by periodically phrasing them in a form opposite from that used by the child.
- Reflect first when children ask you a question.



5. Speak courteously

Use the same social courtesies when talking with children that you would use when talking with adults. Be patient and allow children to speak without interrupting them. Sometimes well-intentioned adults will interrupt children because they feel awkward that a child has not answered quickly. Remember that sometimes younger children take a little longer than adults to formulate their thoughts and generate a message. Therefore, remain silent long enough for children to gather their thoughts.

6. Avoid judgmental comments

Children form self-perceptions based on the messages they receive from the environment. When an ambiguous situation happens, assume the most positive attribution as the cause for the situation. In this way, you will frame events positively or neutrally (give children "benefit of the doubt"). For example, if one child knocks down another's block tower, the adult might say "you want to play with her." This sort of attribution benefits the perceptions of both the provocateur and the victim of the situation. Avoid using labels such as "mean," "bad" or "nice" for children.

7. Talk with each child

Find opportunities to talk with each child informally (snack, outside, etc.). Use "conversation extenders" to encourage children to express themselves. For example, simple statements and questions such as "tell me more," "what happened next?" or "...and then what?" encourage children to continue conversations.

8. Know children's interests

Use children's interests as a basis for conversation and activities. Follow children's leads in conversations and play, organizes activities, centers, materials, etc. based on children's interests.

9. Allow time to relax

Give "down time" opportunities for children to "catch their breath." Time for vigorous physical exercise should be made each day. There should also be time for quiet activities each day.

10. Ask questions

Ask a variety of questions that encourage children to think. Ask open-ended questions that require more than a one or two word answer, such as "yes or no" questions. Adults should be sure to ask questions you really are curious about and would like answered.

11. Use children's names positively

Adults in positive verbal environments use children's names in positive circumstances. Avoid using children's names as a synonym for "stop," "no" or "don't". Also, avoid yelling children's names from across the room. It is important to remember the

tone of voice that one is using when calling children's names. What is the message that you are sending?

12. Reduce frustration

Adults should foster resilient, bounce-back attitudes in young children. One way to accomplish this is to be careful to not belittle children's efforts. Make sure that the environment is free of frustrating materials - puzzles have all pieces, train tracks are not broken, and so on. Avoid using competition as a way to motivate behavior, such as saying "let's see who can put up the blocks first." This type of competitive activity promotes higher levels of frustration in the classroom.



13. Encourage children

Use appropriate praise to encourage children's efforts. Praise should be specific and sincere. Avoid "backhanded compliments," vague or empty comments, or comparisons between children.

14. Tell children what to do.

State rules and redirections positively. Tell children what *to do* rather than what not to do. Redirections should be specific and clear, not vague.

15. Understand children's creativity

For young children, creative activities are more centered on the process than on the outcome or product. Ask open-ended questions and make encouraging statements about creative activities; avoid asking "What is it?" Instead, adults might comment about the materials chil-

dren are using, the colors they are making, or the hard work and attention they are devoting to the task.

16. Respect young children's abilities

Respect and understand children's desire for autonomy; allow children to do things for themselves. Sometimes well-intentioned adults unintentionally send young children the subtle message that they do not believe that the child is capable of doing tasks for themselves by preemptively doing the task for the child.

17. Tell children the reason

Children learn appropriate expectations when adults explain the reasons behind rules. One technique is to use "I messages," for example:

"I'm afraid you'll fall."

"I'm happy that you shared."

"I'm upset that you hit him."

These brief messages demonstrate to children that their actions are important and have an impact on the world around them.

18. Allow children to learn from their actions

Young children are active learners. Children learn from being allowed to experience the negative - as well as the positive - consequences of their own actions. If the adult does not believe that the action will harm the child, others, or property, allow the child to make mistakes and learn by doing. Spilled juice, for example, is easily cleaned up.

19. Give children choices

Give children authentic choices, and allow them to make the choice for themselves. Present children only with choices that adults can and will follow through with. Avoid "master-minding" by providing children with a choice between the option that the teacher wants them to follow and another choice that the teacher believes is so bad the child would never pick it. For example, instead of "put on your shoes or you won't go out to recess" an adult might say "you can put on this shoe, or that shoe." This allows the child to own the decision and make the choice themselves.

20. Include Parents

Classrooms with positive verbal environments are places where parents are made to feel included and welcome. Techniques for promoting positive verbal environments, such as reflective listening, can be used with parents as well as with children.

In summary. Show warmth and smile. Listen carefully to what you say and how you say it.