

Positive Verbal Environments

Setting the Stage for Young Children's Social Development

Darrell Meece and
Anne K. Soderman

MOST OF US have had the experience of entering a room of people and almost instantly feeling comfortable and at ease; at other times and places, we may have felt uncomfortable or uncertain. These types of feelings arise from many aspects of the environment—but the most important is the people sharing the space with us. As social creatures, humans relate to one another in environments that are created through our interactions with each other. Because these environments are created through our com-

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munication and interaction, they may be called verbal environments.

With a renewed interest among educators in children's self-perceptions and the development of social interaction skills, the concept of the *verbal environment*, formulated by Kostelnik, Stein, and Whiren (1988) more than 20 years ago, is worth revisiting. According to Kostelnik and her colleagues, Stein and Whiren,

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. (1988, 29)

A positive verbal environment is one in which children feel valued (Kostelnik et al. 2009). It fosters in them positive feelings and beliefs about themselves and others (Meece & Mize 2009) and promotes the internalization of self-discipline (Gartrell 2007). Adults create a positive verbal environment by interacting with children in ways that make the children feel valued and special (Stanulis & Manning 2002). On the other hand, adults create a negative verbal environment when they speak to children in ways that make the children feel belittled or demeaned or the focus of blame or conflict. The quality of the



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verbal environment sets the stage for children's developing perceptions of themselves and others (Gartrell 1997; Meece, Colwell, & Mize 2007).

Tips for fostering social interaction skills

The following teaching strategies support safe, enriching environments that promote the development of young children's social interaction skills.

1. Know and respect each child as an individual. Teachers make

children feel special and wanted by warmly welcoming them to the classroom (Kostelnik et al. 2009). Greet each child each day. Address every child by name, and ensure that your nonverbal communication is consistent with positive verbal communication; meet children with smiles, warm eye contact, and supportive touches. Be especially careful to greet children

who tend to be shy, so that they do not go unnoticed. Knowing the interests of each child can help teachers think of conversation openers and suggest opportunities for participation in classroom activities.

Use the children's interests as a basis for conversation and activities (Kostelnik et al. 2009). Follow their lead in conversations and play. Consider their interests when planning activities, centers, projects, and themes and when selecting materials and books. In negative verbal environments, adults ignore children's interests and focus activities and conversations on adult interests or agendas. Remember to use children's names positively. Never use a child's name as a synonym for *stop*, *no*, or *don't* or say the child's name in a negative tone or loudly from across the room.

2. Show interest in children and their activities. Be actively engaged with them on their level: kneel, squat, or sit, so that your eyes are level with children's eyes (Kostelnik et al. 2009). When giving directions or guidance, move near the child rather than calling out or yelling across a room. Enter children's play and participate fully, but follow the children's lead instead of directing it. In contrast, in negative verbal environments, adults avoid actively interacting with children and concentrate on daily routines and classroom maintenance. They show little or no interest in children's interests and activities.

Another strategy that shows children you are interested is using *behavior reflections* (Meece 2009) that describe some aspect of a child's behavior. These statements are directed to the child, not made as third-party comments (for example, "You are building a tower with blocks" versus "Sheila is always going to the block area"). Behavior reflections use only nonjudgmental vocabulary ("You two are playing together") as opposed to judgments, whether positive or negative ("You two aren't being nice to your friends"). Adults can also support creativity by making encouraging statements and reflections, such as "You are really working hard" or "You are mixing blue and red."

Listen actively to children. Children feel valued when teachers pay attention to what they are saying. One effective active-listening strategy is the use of *paraphrase reflections* (Gordon 1992), in which you restate the children's words in your own words. For example, if a child says, "Train go up," you might say, "You are making the train go up the hill." In a negative verbal environment, adults ignore children, pay only superficial attention to what children say, or act as if they are being inconvenienced by children's communication.



3. Speak courteously. In positive verbal environments, teachers are patient and polite when speaking to the children, parents, and each other (Kostelnik et al. 2009). Teachers allow children to speak without interruption. In negative verbal environments, adults are often discourteous to children—they may talk down to them or use sarcasm or snide comments when talking with them or to others about them.

Find opportunities to talk with children informally, such as during snack, lunch, or outside play. Encourage children to express themselves by using conversation extenders such as “Tell me more,” “What happened next?” or “And then what?” Invite children to express ideas, and give all children the feeling that they have a voice in the classroom. This means taking the time to listen and respond positively to all children, especially dual language learners, who benefit from the experience with language and who may face an increased risk of being “left out” due to their limited language skills (Wolfe 1992). In contrast, in negative verbal environments, adults avoid talking with children or do not encourage them to expand on their comments. They talk to children primarily to give directions, state rules, and attempt to change behavior.

Children develop more positive perceptions of themselves and others when adults do not make judgmental comments to them or about them. Avoid applying labels to children such as *mean*, *bad*, or even *nice*. Frame events positively or neutrally, giving children the benefit of the doubt. For example, if a 3-year-old knocks down a classmate’s block construction, you

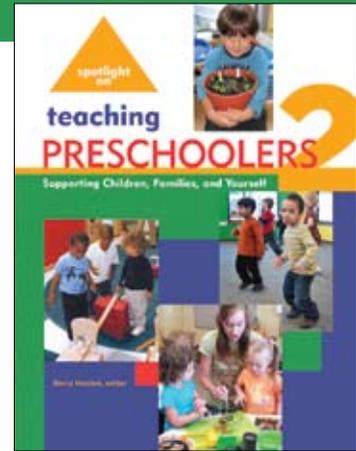
might say to the builder, “Oh, it looks like he wants to play blocks with you.” This type of positive framing not only involves the child whose blocks were knocked down but also the child who knocked them down (Meece, Colwell, & Mize 2007); both children may interpret the situation as a desire to play.

4. Ask a variety of questions. Pose questions that encourage children to think and questions that you are genuinely curious about and truly want answered. Open-ended questions invite more than one- or two-word answers (Hendrick 2000). For example, ask a child rolling a cylinder down a ramp, “How can you make it go faster / slower / farther?”

Do not ask rhetorical questions or questions for which no real answer is expected or desired. A question such as, “Do you want to miss going outside today so that you can stay in and clean up these toys?” is not a question the adult expects a child to answer.

Understanding children’s creativity enables adults to form better questions. With young children, art and creative activities are centered more on process than outcome or product (Szyba 1999). A child may not be drawing or painting in an attempt to symbolize anything in particular, but rather may be enjoying sensory aspects of the activity, such as the feel of the brush or the mixture of the colors. Be supportive by asking children open-ended questions about their creative activities, such as, “What can you tell me about that?” rather than “What is it?”

5. Use appropriate praise to encourage children. Appropriate praise is sincere, constructive, and encouraging (Gartrell 2007). Children



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Encourage children to express themselves by using conversation extenders such as “Tell me more,” “What happened next?” or “And then what?”

thrive when adults notice and comment on their efforts as well as their accomplishments and mention positive changes they observe in behavior and abilities over time. Foster the development of prosocial behavior by pointing out the positive effects that one child's behavior has on another. Treat mistakes or let-downs matter-of-factly, responding with positive, resilient, bounce-back statements ("Sometimes the juice spills. That's OK, we can clean it up and pour some more"). It is never appropriate to use words to belittle children; use words to celebrate rather than minimize children's efforts and accomplishments.

Sometimes adults praise children in ways that are vague, empty, and insincere. For example, praise may be a backhanded compliment ("You put all the toys away, for once"). Never compare children, praising one in an attempt to motivate behavior in others ("I wish everyone was as good a cleaner-upper as Amari"). These types of statements negate rather than enhance children's self-perceptions.

In positive verbal environments, praise is intended to foster children's intrinsic motivation; in negative verbal environments, praise is often linked to external rewards. In a negative verbal environment, adults may encourage competition rather than cooperation, inadvertently increasing children's stress and frustration (Hostetler 1992). For example, a teacher might use competition to motivate desired behavior—"Whoever cleans up the fastest can sit next to me at snack time."

6. State expectations clearly.

When teachers state rules and redirections positively, children know what to



do rather than what not to do (Gartrell 1997). Rather than saying "Don't run," say "Let's walk." Avoid saying *no* and *stop*, and instead focus on the behaviors that you would like children to use. Make these positive statements in ways that are specific and clear. Avoid vague statements such as "Be nice" or "Be friendly." Instead, tell children explicitly what to do, using clear, age-appropriate vocabulary. For example, give a child a script, such as "Tell Amanda, 'You can ride the trike when I am finished,'" rather than simply saying, "Use your words."

Children learn appropriate expectations when adults explain the purpose behind rules and redirections. With *inductive discipline*, children develop an inner sense of right and wrong through learning the effect of their behavior on others (Hoffman 1983; Grusec & Goodnow 1994). In one inductive technique, teachers use "I" messages to describe the impact of behaviors—for example, "I'm afraid

you'll fall" or "I'm upset because you hurt me" or "I'm so happy you shared." In negative verbal environments, adults do not explain reasons for rules to children, or they use power-assertion and threats as the basis for rules ("Because I said so," "Do this or else").

7. Respect children's abilities.

During the toddler and preschool years, young children increasingly seek feelings of autonomy. Effective teachers realize that it is important to allow children to do things for themselves. Children can wipe up spilled juice and wash their own glue-covered hands. Sometimes well-meaning adults inadvertently indicate that they do not believe children are capable, for example, telling a 2-year-old, "Here, sweetie, I'll put that jacket on for you." This can send the message that you doubt the child's abilities, and such statements over time may reinforce in children feelings of helplessness. Be especially careful of overprotecting shy children and children with different abilities.

Remember that there are cultural differences in how adults perceive the balance between supporting young children's abilities and caring

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for young children's needs. In some cultures adults believe that taking care of young children's needs are signs of caring, and so it is important to be sensitive to cultural differences in how adults support young children's developing sense of autonomy and independence.

8. Allow children to learn from their actions. Young children are active learners, constructing their knowledge of the world from acting upon it. Just as they learn physical properties of objects by experimenting and learning from mistakes, they learn social information by being allowed to experience the negative—as well as the positive—consequences of their own actions (Eaton 1997). Because young children are

concrete thinkers, experiencing natural consequences—the outcomes that occur without any adult intervention—can be powerful learning opportunities. For example, if a child breaks a toy on purpose, the natural consequence is that she will no longer have the toy to play with.

Of course, if a child's actions might result in harm—either physical or emotional—to himself or others, then teachers must step in, and the natural consequences will not unfold. When children engage in aggressive behavior, intervene immediately, sending the clear message, "Everyone here is safe. I will not allow anyone to hurt you, and I will not allow you to hurt anyone else."

Teachers should connect a child's actions to logical consequences in authentic ways. In the example of the broken toy, a teacher might ask the child to help repair it. In positive verbal environments, adults respond to children's mistakes with encouraging, resilience-building comments. On the other hand, adults in negative verbal environments impose unrelated and arbitrary consequences and punishments that have no real connection to the child's behavior.

9. Give children choices. Present children with authentic choices and allow them to make decisions themselves (Greenberg 1987; Eaton 1997). Offer only choices that you can and will allow. Adults in negative verbal environments direct children in what to do or offer a choice between what the adult desires and an option so distasteful that the child would not possibly choose it. Such choices can

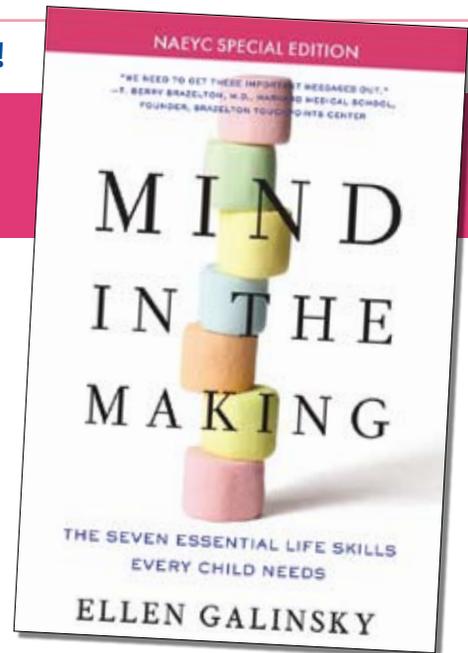
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It is up to each of us to reflect on which positive guidance practices best fit our own interaction styles and each unique group of children.

be attempts to manipulate the child so that he will make the appropriate decision; thus, the choices are not authentic. In other cases, adults often are not prepared, willing, or able to follow through with a child's decision. For example, a child's choices might be to sit quietly for group time or not go outside later—a choice that is not authentic because there are no extra adults to provide supervision in the classroom while the rest of the group goes outdoors. Because the teacher assumes that the child will choose sitting quietly in lieu of giving up outdoor time, the teacher may be unprepared to handle the other decision.

Creative and art activities are excellent opportunities to allow children free choice. Providing models of completed art projects can hinder children's creativity. Avoid suggesting to children that there is only one right way to use art materials.

10. Include and welcome families.

Classrooms with positive verbal environments are places where family members feel included and welcome. The same positive techniques used for communicating with children can be applied to families. Communicate with parents regularly, whether face-to-face, through written notes, or through other methods. Acknowledge and dis-

cuss cultural differences in child guidance philosophies (Gonzalez-Mena & Shareef 2005). In a negative verbal environment, teachers may attempt to avoid families, feel uncomfortable around certain parents, and fail to communicate important information about their child's daily experiences and ongoing progress.

Conclusion

There is no single right way to establish and maintain a positive verbal environment. We all have different styles of interaction and communication, and because verbal environments are mutually created by the individuals interacting in them, they reflect the unique combination of the participants. It is up to each of us to reflect on which positive guidance practices best fit our own interaction styles and each unique group of children. Perhaps the most basic building blocks are simply being thoughtful and kind.

Teachers who recognize their vital role in establishing a positive verbal environment will take the opportunity to turn negative classroom environments into positive places (Stanulis & Manning 2002). With interpersonal warmth and sensitivity, they create positive verbal environments in which children feel safe to develop and practice social skills.

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