The Nursery Way: Organizing Language for Children

Language—how we speak to children—is a powerful organizing tool to help children regulate their feelings, state of arousal, attention and behavior. This includes our words, our tone of voice and our body language. Having a repertoire of phrases readily available to us can also organize us to feel better equipped to address the challenges we encounter in our work. This also reinforces our role as teachers.

• The Nursery is a safe place.
  Message--You are safe here.
  We will keep you, your siblings/friends/ourselves safe.

• This is how we ____ at the Nursery. I'll help you.
  Message--This is a consistent, predictable place.
  Grown-ups are here to help kids. You can ask for help.
  It's okay to let grown-ups be in charge—you can trust us to keep you safe here.
  Grown-ups help kids manage their Big Feelings.

• At the Nursery, we don’t ____ (use scary words, hit, etc.); we ____ (can say __, use words).
  Message--This is a consistent, predictable place.
  I will show you a different way to do things/ help you shift gears because that's hard when you are having Big Feelings.
  I won't judge you—I'll just let you know what behavior is or isn't okay here.
  This is a different, special place.

• This is hard, but I will help you.
  Message--I understand that it’s hard to do things a different way/have Big Feelings, etc.
  I can hold/tolerate all your Big Feelings (and I will help you learn to do that to—even worry).
  This is a place where grown-ups help kids--
  And I am worthy of help.

• I'm going to stop you because __________________.
  Message--Grown-ups are in charge and we will keep you and others safe.
  We are here to help you.
  Our limits and expectations are clear, consistent and predictable.
  I won't be rejected if I make a mistake.

• Next time, you can ____________.
  Message--I believe you are competent and want to do things well.
  You don't have to feel ashamed because there will be a next time to show me you CAN do it.

• I'm wondering if you're feeling ____________.
  Message--I understand your feelings and will help you through this.
  This feeling has a name and knowing that can give you power over the feeling.
• Lots of kids feel __________ when ______________.
  Message--Your feelings are normal and make sense to me—you are okay.
  There is a reason for your feeling ['connecting the dots' between events and feelings]

• I was thinking about you…
  Message--I hold you in my mind even when I am not with you because you are special.

• I like the way you…
  Message—I notice the good things you are, say and do.
  You are a competent and special person.

• In two more minutes, it will be time to stop___ so we can go ___.
  Message--The world is a safe, predictable place.
  Start thinking about getting your coping skills ready to make a transition--and this is what will happen next.

• I am going to change your diaper, wipe your nose, etc.
  Message--The world is a safe, predictable place.
  Start thinking about getting your coping skills ready to make a transition.
  You have control over your body.

• I know you know how to put your shoes on, but sometimes everyone needs a little help—how about if I put one on and you put one on?
  Message—Adults here really do take care of kids here.
  It’s okay to ask for help—I can get my needs met.
  It doesn’t have to be my way or your way—we can negotiate.

**And when words don’t work…**

Children who are really upset (tantruming, frightened, distressed) may not be able to process words in the moment. They need to know that they (and their feelings) are okay and that the adult can handle their Big Feelings. Our physical presence and our body language become especially important—staying close by, singing softly, holding, rocking—words can come later. If we stay calm when a child is upset, he/she learns that:

• I won’t be abandoned during difficult times.
• Momentary rage doesn’t result in rejection.
• Feelings CAN be contained and NOT derail the competency of my caregiver
• Calm comes after the storm

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