



Words Matter: Inclusive Language to Reflect All Children

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"Whether we think before we speak or not, our words have an impact and shape our world environment- shape how we see the world." - Lura Reed, Ph.D. Family Studies Instructor at Oregon State University.

Words are powerful and can be used to affirm or dismiss people's experiences. Sometimes we inadvertently use language that does not fairly represent everyone. Some words stand for a segment of a group, but are posed as though they stand for the entire group. In this case the words used may be obtuse, but they sting nonetheless. Feeling invisible or misrepresented is wounding. Being thoughtful of our language- considering what we're really saying, who we're truly including, or overlooking- is important.

Since we have grown up in a world that values some people's experiences over others, we are raised with and absorb biases. Our language reflects this flawed learning and bias. In order to avoid passing on our biases to our children, we must address language that favors one group over another. When we bring attention to our words, we can avoid biased language and work toward a bias-free practice. This is a bold process because we are essentially working against institutional oppression as it affects our children, school and community.

Early childhood educators agree that building children's self-esteem and fostering a strong self image is critical in the growth of young learners. Being thoughtful about our language is one significant way to foster this growth. As we become increasingly conscious of our language, we are able to work toward equitable practices that accurately reflect everyone. Inclusive language gives the message that you are safe here- you belong- we are thinking about you- this applies to you. The board at Tualatin Family Preschool recently drafted a handout on the importance of using inclusive language:

Inclusive language is using words and phrases that make everyone part of the group. It is communicating in a way that includes all the children... Inclusive language is about understanding the individual child and his/her way that includes all the children... Inclusive language is about understanding the individual child and his/her family, then communicating with him or her in a way that honors differences, rather than ignores them.

—"Using Inclusive Language" handout, Tualatin Family Preschool

Because we want each child to feel safe and affirmed, valued and reflected, we need to pay attention to our words, noting whether or not our words reflect each child's experience. We need to be cognizant that each child does not have the same experience. We need to individualize the message to address what is relevant for each child, or we need to use phrases that include everyone.

Who Am I?

Preschoolers' primary identity context is within their family. Children are safest and known best in their homes, with the people they love. It is essential that we honor and reflect their families and home-life accurately with the words we use.

We need to refrain from making assumptions about each child. Ideally, we get to know each child and family individually, so that we know what words best describe their situation. If we are thoughtful in this way, our intent to connect with each child will be relevant and well-received.

Who Is In Your Family?: Language Reflecting Real Families

Although many families are headed by a mom and a dad, many are configured differently. The term "parents" refers to a much broader grouping of people than "mom and dad." "Parents" may include birth parents, adoptive parents, divorced parents, and step- parents alike. In addition, two-mom families, two-dad families, single-parent families, blended families and families in which a grandparent is paramount also make up our community of parents. The terms "parents" or "families" may be preferred over "mom and dad," as they affirm the broader range of family configurations that actually exist. When we're talking to a group of children and we say, "Your families are coming to pick you up soon," we're equally representing the children whose aunt, grandma or nanny is picking them up. Those children are reassured, knowing that we are thinking well about them.

What Will I Be When I Grow Up?

The workers in our community loom large for young children. Consider a child's awe of a fire fighter or construction worker. These are powerful figures—role models of future possibilities. How we refer to these workers impacts children's self-worth and sense of what is possible for them. If we want children to experience a broad range of options for their future life's work, then our language needs to reflect it.

Learning from Road Construction Signs

Outdated are the orange road construction signs, "Men at work." They have been changed to "Workers Ahead," emphasizing the job, rather than the gender of the person doing the job. Women construction workers can labor proudly in these work zones, and girls driving by can see themselves in the newly worded signs. At the same time male construction workers are reminded that their female sisters doing the job beside them are welcome and valuable workers, just as they are. Boys passing by can see that their female friends, sisters, cousins, and so on, can grow up and take on this important work, just as they can.

There are a myriad of other widely used gender neutral job titles, such as hair stylist, massage therapist, accountant, basketball player, dentist, garbage collector, mechanic, doctor, teacher, mediator, and so on. We can learn from these examples and shift our language with worker roles that are frequently referred to in a biased way. When we use language that has the word "man" in it, children image a male in that role. It reinforces a limitation, giving the message that only boys and men can take on these jobs. We can easily remedy this, shifting toward gender-neutral language. Examples include: firefighter (instead of fireman), mail carrier (instead of mailman), police officer (instead of policeman), and angler (instead of fisherman).

We might also choose to steer away from gender-specific job titles, recognizing that it's the job, not the gender of the person doing the job that is important (e.g. flight attendant instead of stewardess/steward, server instead of waiter/waitress). Modifying our language in this way, we help convey that it is possible for a woman or a man to take on each job, thus freeing our children from narrow gender scripts. As we grow more thoughtful of our words, we consider the experience of those around us and gain awareness in the part we play in that experience.

We can be proud of our intent to use affirming language in our school and community. This is a process that takes time, awareness and patience. Thanks for joining me in this endeavor to create a more just school and community. We are making an important difference in the current and future lives of the children we love.