

SESSION 4 Understanding your child's behaviour Time to have a go: Helpful phrases you could use when talking with your child

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If you think your child's behaviour is communicating something different to how it appears you could begin by saying *'Could it be that you ...'*

For example:

'Could it be that you are upset with me because I have said you can't have a biscuit now but in a few minutes you can have your dinner.'

'Could it be that you are upset with me because I have said no, but you know that I am saying no because you wouldn't have time to finish your homework if you go out now and don't come back until 10 pm.'

You could begin by putting a positive emphasis on a phrase by saying *'I would really like but it is difficult when ...'*

For example:

'I would really like to let you play for a few minutes more but today it is difficult because we have to go out. Maybe we could think of another time when you can play.'

'I would really like you to meet your friends in town but it is difficult when you haven't worked out how you will get there safely.'

The 'broken record' or 'scratched CD' technique

When your child breaks a rule, it is important to respond to their behaviour promptly. The best way to do this is to be sensitive and assertive. One of the most helpful approaches is called the 'broken record' technique.

It gives your child a clear message and avoids confrontation or escalation of the problem. At the same time it also helps you remain in control. It is also an extremely effective way to avoid an argument. You will need to think about how old your child is and what they are able understand.



4.20 Here's how it works:

Let's say for instance that your child is breaking the house rule – 'We tidy up after ourselves'. You ask them to tidy up and they respond by saying 'Tidy up yourself!'.

The first three times your child argues/refuses – simply take on board what they've said (to show mutual respect), then repeat the instruction.

Remember to keep your voice calm and soft and to deal with the matter privately.

Parent: *'Daniel our rule is we tidy up after ourselves'*

Child: *'But Ben hasn't!'*

Parent: *'I understand that and I'll speak to Ben next. The rule is we tidy up after ourselves.'*

Daniel: *'You always pick on me!'*

Parent: *'I'm sorry you think that Daniel, we can discuss that later if you like. Right now I need you to tidy up after yourself, thanks.'*

Daniel: *'No!'*

By the third time of asking, most people will see you 'mean business' and comply. So it is best to end the conversation by simply saying thanks

If your child still continues to argue/refuse, we need to move onto our sanctions hierarchy. Staying calm, we present a choice:

Parent: *'I'd rather you didn't have to lose 10p of your pocket money, so I need you to tidy up after yourself, thanks.'*

When presenting this final choice, make it clear that you don't want to give them the sanction – it's their choice (for example, saying that you don't want them to lose their pocket money). Ensure that you put the choice that is preferable to you (and them!) last. This is far more positive and less confrontational and avoids arguments. It also makes someone more likely to do it!



The example above sounds far better than *'Tidy up or you'll lose 10p of your pocket money,'* which sounds like a threat. The child may then feel as though they have to stand their ground and the expected response to this would be *'Go on then, keep it!'* (if you're lucky!).

Once this choice has been presented, do not pursue the argument. If your child does as you've asked, say *'Thanks.'* If they do not, carry out the sanction calmly and matter-of-factly. It is important to always carry the sanction through.

This gives a positive end to the situation. It is better not to add any further discussion or comment such as *'See you can do it,'* or *'This way you don't lose your pocket money.'*

Both phrases may stir up negative feelings in your child and could result in them showing their feelings in their behaviour, such as not tidying their room, sulking or saying something back to you.

Things to think about when using this technique

1. Give your child 'take up time'. This means backing off after giving them the instruction to allow them to follow it without losing face. Each child is different and you will come to know how long and in what way your child signals to you they are able to think and act in the way you would like them to.
2. Saving face is important for children just as it is for adults. Feeling embarrassed or being 'shown up' can provoke strong feelings in all of us that can get in the way of being able to think clearly and lead to us acting in a way we would not normally think acceptable.

Just like adults children are more likely to follow what you want if they feel both of you are getting something from a situation. So in the example above the parent gets Daniel to tidy his room and Daniel get his parent's approval and respect. You do not want to put them into a win/lose situation (especially in front of other people). If it's a choice between looking like a loser in front of their friends/family or offending and confronting you, children will find it very difficult to control their feelings and not act defensively.



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3. Be prepared to carry out the sanction. If you do not carry out the sanction your child will learn that boundaries may be threatened but are not carried out.
4. When choosing a sanction it is important to think about what the sanction will mean for you and your child. You do not want the sanction to be so overwhelming that your child loses focus from the first message you are trying to give them. For example if you said they would be grounded for a month and in that time they had a close friend's birthday party, they may feel so angry and upset that tidying their room is completely forgotten. They may well stop thinking about what they did wrong and start thinking about how what you did was wrong!

If you then have to put the sanction in place you may then have a child in the house trying to cope with strong feelings and showing these feelings in their behaviour for a whole month. Knowing this, you will be less likely to complete the sanction.

Putting in small reasonable sanctions that can be carried out shortly after the incident will mean your child will be more likely to remember why you have put in the sanction.

