

D3 — Talking Informatively

1. Teacher Statements

This module takes us in a different direction. Instead of telling a story about a child, this module is about you. Adults attempt to lead children individually and collectively forward through how they talk, so it is important to study talking in the most effective way possible. The way we adults phrase something can make a big difference in children's sense of responsibility and orientation to others in the community.

You are going to use an analysis tool to distinguish statements that require children to comply from those that do not require them to do anything at all: demanding vs. non-demanding.

Assignment

Record: The task is to collect examples of adult statements in order to analyze them. Your task is to write down exactly 50 statements another adult makes to children at a free play or transition time, indoors or out, with their permission, of course. We are not recording these at group time, when the teacher is leading a game, story, or song, etc., because the social context is different from free play.

Code: After collecting this set of 50 teacher statements, you have the task of using this table of functions to classify each statement by marking it with one of these 5 code letters:

D direction	Statement requires or directly commands an action that the children must do or not do, e.g., <i>Get your coat. Let's use quiet voices. I need you to stop that.</i>	Demanding
T tutorial	A question the adult knows the answer to, e.g., <i>What color is this pen? Where does your coat go? What is happening?</i>	
Q query	A question the adult does not know the answer to, e.g., <i>What did your mother say? Where are you going?</i>	
I information	Facts and observations given to describe, advise and enlighten, e.g., <i>That's wet. It is cleanup time. You painted two pictures today. Blue is my favorite color.</i>	Non-demanding
S social	Statements said for social reasons, e.g., <i>Ok? Hello. Oh, really? I don't know. Could be. Fine. That's good.</i> This category includes teacher repetitions of what the child just said and anything that does not fit into the other categories.	

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It may not be clear where some go.

If you have exactly 50 in total, the arithmetic is simpler. Because we will be figuring percentages of each kind of talk it is really easy to compute with 50. All one has to do is count the number of one kind of statement and multiply by 2. If you have more or less than 50, you may have to use a calculator.

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2. Demands

Now we are ready to study our own direction giving and question asking. We are going to be looking at the 3 types of statements that put demands on children to perform: directions, tutorials and queries. These we call *demands*.

Assignment

Count: Your task is to count the number of times you issue *directions* to children, for two days. Then your task is to count the number of *questions* you ask, including both tutorials and queries, for two days.

You are doing four counts.

Day 1 count directions.

Day 2 count directions

Day 3 count all questions

Day 4 count all questions

Count all the time you are working with children or at least 3 hours whichever is less.

You can tally each on a note pad or on tape stuck to your hand or use a mechanical counter.

Write: Here are the questions to address in your portfolio:

- a) *What was it like to count demands?*
- b) *What was the effect upon the children?*
- c) *What pattern do I see?*
- d) *How do I want to be?*

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3. Descriptive Cues

When we direct children, telling them exactly what to do, they have only two choices: (1) they can comply when they do not really want to comply — acquiescence, or (2) they can refuse to comply — rebellion. There are no other options. If we talk informatively about what needs doing rather than direct, we offer children the opportunity to take initiative and think for themselves.

Now that you have seen your habits in this regard, the challenge is to lessen the number of directions. It can be difficult, as we rarely escape the need to interest children in doing things they are not now doing. The challenge is to get them to do necessary things without pushing. We can stop directing and stop pushing by talking informatively.

A guide for helping make the shift is the Descriptive Cue Sequence. This systematic procedure sequences the amount of "push" a teacher gives — from nothing, to light, to a bit more, to heavy, and to really heavy. You simply follow the sequence.

To get children to do something, we start with a signal. This informs them that it is time to act, as in "It is time for bed." It doesn't have to be words; it can be flashing the lights, an alarm ringing, or the sound of a bell. These kinds of signals often work better than words. For example, a chime can cue it is time to clean up the room without the adult ever saying it; the chime sounds and the children shout, "It's cleanup time!" You could play a selection of recorded music or sing a special song to signal it, too. Of course, words, such as, "It's time to go/do..." work also. Ideally, the children will respond to that signal and begin. If after a reasonable time, they do not, then we go to the next step down the Descriptive Cue Sequence. The chart serves as a guide to consistent and light facilitation.

Post: You can display the Descriptive Cue Sequence chart in your room to remind you of the steps. When learning any new way to talk, it can be helpful to have a handy reminder. The wall chart also helps your co-workers understand what you are trying to do.

Coordinate: This procedure is most effective in transferring responsibility to the children if all the adults in your setting are willing to use this sequence. If one teacher remains directive, the children may continue to wait until they are told and nothing will change. It can help, therefore, to discuss this assignment with others that work in the setting. You can invite them to try this sequence with you to coordinate your effort to investigate the effect upon the children. You can't see what happens unless everyone is trying it, too.

Assignment

Between now and the next session we are counting number of times we start at the top of the Descriptive Cue Sequence.

Here are the questions to answer in your portfolio:

- a) *What did you notice?*
- b) *What are your plans for the future?*

Descriptive Cue Sequence

signal	give a verbal ("It's time to...") or non-verbal (bell or lights) signal, waiting 10 to 15 seconds, noting and supporting desirable actions when you see them
description	provide facts: what needs doing, where things are, what the procedures are, etc.
model	demonstrate how to do it, while talking to yourself aloud about what you are doing and thinking
direction	issue a clear, simple instruction to act
draw a line	link next activity to achieving a specified minimal level of performance <i>"After you do _____, then you can do _____."</i>

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4. Information

This task asks you to develop your ability to talk informatively in all your interactions with children. You explored this idea in Module D1 when you used factual descriptions as a form of positive recognition. Here you will examine 3 other ways to inform.

Information teaches children, not only about the world, but also about how we use language to convey experience. If we could step back and look at ourselves from above, we would see a huge amount of information we pass on to children over time. Parents talk to their children about animals and food and thousands of things. Teachers name the parts of a worm the child holds and describe the feelings of an upset child when others won't let him play.

This investigation explores intentionally increasing the amount you say about yourself, about what you see, and about possibilities and connections the present world has to non-present things. There are the three ways to explore:

Subjective Talk—We say what we are thinking, doing, or care about. We can convey our past experiences relating to something the child is focused upon in this present time, here and now. This is information particular to you, a unique individual, pertaining to the child's current experience. Examples: *I have never seen anyone do that before. I came to watch you. I used to do that, too. I have a blue hat like that. I use paper towels. I'd like to sit with you.*

Descriptions—We say what the child sees, hears, senses, or could sense at this moment in time. Examples: *Three green cars. The clothespin holds those together. More pens are on the shelf. That sound is from the heater. It smells like almonds. It's dripping from your fingers. That color is maroon.*

Expansions—We provide additional information based upon what the child presently sees, yet intentionally going beyond what is present. We can provide reasons for things, what happened in the past, and what may happen in the future. We can offer other possibilities or comment upon similarities or connections with other things. Examples: *The spring forces the pins back together. When you sneeze into your arm, germs don't get on your hands. Yesterday no one played with that. Tomorrow we will have more time. When it dries it won't drip. You could use tape or staples. The envelope is like wrapping a present. Both of you have discovered ways to make brown.*

Note: each expansion must relate to something that the child is attending to in his or her perception now. Those that are beyond the child's current perception are often beyond young children's understanding, e.g., "Sumatra has a tropical climate." If the child cannot see "Sumatra" or "tropical" or "climate," the words do not make sense.

Assignment

Your task is to collect 10 examples of each kind of informative talk as you work with children, 30 statements total. You can collect your own talk by keeping a notebook handy, recording yourself, or having someone write down what you say. If you are working with children age 2 and under, you may find it more reasonable to find older children to practice your expansions upon; subjective talk and descriptions are fine.

Here are the questions to address in your portfolio:

- a) *What did you notice about yourself?*
- b) *What happened with the children?*

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5. Self-assessment

With the previous work as preparation, you are ready to assess your ability to incorporate informative talk in your daily routine. You have the pieces in place.

Directions D You are aware of habits we all have in telling children what to do. You know more educational ways to facilitate children. You can now eliminate, almost entirely, all directions to children. If you choose to do so, you will begin to see an enhanced sense of responsibility emerge in the children.

Information I You can use descriptive cues, subjective talk, descriptions, and expansions. A wide variety of non-demanding ways to talk to children is open for you to use.

It takes time to change any habit, and talking is no different. Being systematic can change habits more quickly, so can help from your friends. Even the children can help you.

Assignment

Measure Before: Your task is to do a two-day baseline count of the number of directions **D** and simultaneously the number of informative statements **I** you say to children. A simple way to count is to place two short strips of masking tape on your hand or wrist, one marked **D** and one marked **I**. Each time you say a direction mark the **D** tape. Each time you say something informative, mark the **I** tape. You could also use a notepad.

The greatest value comes from choosing a “bossy” time, say 20 minutes or so, when giving directions naturally occurs, such as clean-up time, a transition to outdoors, or getting children toileted or fed. This baseline count happens twice, at that same time, two days in a row.

Set objectives: After you have these two days counted, you set a challenge for yourself, a specific goal you think you could achieve 2 weeks from now. This is a chance to work on becoming the person you want to be. You pick a lower number of directions to reduce or eliminate them and a higher number of informative statements to increase those.

Check #1: We count **D** and **I** a third time before our next session to see if we change.

Here are the questions to answer in your portfolio.

- a) *What did you notice?*
- b) *What do you find most helpful here?*

The investigation continues for an additional week.

Check #2: This is a second check one week beyond that next session to see if you achieved your end objective. We will share Check #2 at that subsequent meeting.

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6. Rich Vocabulary

This investigation explores adding uncommon words to the language you habitually use around children. We often use simple words when children are very young; even children use “baby talk” to talk to children when they are very young. By age 3, however, a child's understanding of the language(s) adults use are so advanced that a growing vocabulary becomes essential for their continued challenge. The size of a child's vocabulary can be an incredible advantage or a devastating handicap. By talking to children with a rich, adult vocabulary, we can make a lifetime of difference to a child.

The research has been in for a number of years. It clearly documents that by the time a child is five, he or she understands between 10,000 and 17,000. Dividing that total by the number of days a child has been alive, a child averages 5 to 10 new words per day!

Not all children have a complex language to figure out. We have a huge difference between the life experiences and capabilities of children who grow up with rich vocabularies and those who do not. (You can look up Todd Hart and Betty Risley anywhere.) Children from highly educated homes add an average of 6 new vocabulary words in each 100 words spoken, while children from less advantaged homes add fewer than 3 new words in every 100 words used. The difference adds up. From age 30 to 36 months, when children are using sentences and clauses regularly in their speech, those with rich experiences add 350 words per month, versus 168 words for the other children. Not only are some children hearing and using more words, their rate of growth is twice as high. The more words they know, the more words they want to know. They seek them out.

You know children who have high vocabularies because the adults in their lives always talked to them as if they could understand big words, too. They used full, rich adult vocabulary and grammar.

Professionals in early childhood education have a responsibility to use rich vocabulary with all children, so we can try to do all we can in interactions with children in their language learning years. You can intentionally support all children's vocabulary development by increasing the use of more uncommon words as you talk to them. You have another thing to do.

Assignment

Create Vocabulary Cards: The task this time is to create vocabulary cards for one activity a day for 4 days. One way to do that is to list less commonly used nouns, verbs, descriptors, and words for parts of things.

Let us say you have scissors and things to cut. You can generate, with others, a list of words that are less commonly used. Noun: shears, clippers. Verb: shear, trim. Descriptor: sharp, dull. Parts: pivot, blade. If you need help you can look it up at Wikipedia or use a visual glossary. With the vocabulary cards before you as the children play, you incorporate that vocabulary in whatever way seems natural. If you think of more words, you can add them onto the card. If you keep the card in an organized place, you can gradually create a resource for others.

Here are the questions to answer in your portfolio.

- a) *What results did you see in the children?*
- b) *What effect did this project have on you?*

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7. Project of Understanding

In order to complete this module successfully each participant demonstrates the ability to talk to children informatively with a rich vocabulary. In D1 and D2, you demonstrated your ability by showing changes that occurred in the lives of children. In this module, your challenge is to demonstrate the depth of your understanding in yourself. The aim is to show that you understand what it means to talk informatively to enhance children's lives.

Here are some examples:

Record your ability to talk informatively with children. It could be a short videotape program demonstrating your ability while children play or clean up. It could be a transcript of what you said, recorded by a colleague as you talk with children.

You could also educate others. You could create a bulletin board for parents displaying photographs of children and examples of how to talk informatively to children, with rich vocabulary, and present a short rationale. You could make handouts with examples, too.

You could write a letter to parents or present to parents at a meeting. You could convey what you learned about informative talk or demonstrate how to get children to do something, such as go to bed, get dressed or clean up, in an informative way without telling children what to do.

You could make signs for the classroom, both inside and out, giving names for all that is usually unnamed, such as the plants, the fixtures, and the materials things are made of.

Assignment

Plan: Devise a way to show you can talk informatively by doing one of the suggestions above or designing something similar with the help of your Guide.

Share: To complete the module each participant communicates to others an ability to talk informatively. You show that (1) you have the ability to talk informatively, (2) you create a means to convey this ability to an audience outside this group, (3) you actually share that means with that audience, and (4) you share it also with us. The goal is to show other teachers and parents how informative talk works to enhance children's lives.

This presentation becomes another of the essential for your professional portfolio.