

*We Skoolhouse*

---

# **Phrases to Remove (And What to Say Instead)**





## **Transforming Early Childhood Communication: Building Connections Through Language**

In early childhood, the language we use plays a pivotal role in shaping how children understand themselves, their relationships, and the world around them. Traditionally, phrases like "use your words," "be careful," or "say sorry" have been commonplace in guiding children's behavior and communication. However, as our understanding of child development evolves, so too should our approach to communication. It's crucial to recognize that the words we choose not only convey instructions but also lay the foundation for deeper connections and effective teaching moments.

Moving beyond traditional directives, our language can foster empathy, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills in children. By encouraging thoughtful expression, acknowledging feelings, and guiding discussions rather than simply issuing commands, we create opportunities for meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding. This evolution in communication aims to build trust and respect between children and their caregivers, nurturing a supportive environment where learning and growth thrive organically.



## **Phrases to Remove (And What to Say Instead)**

- “Use your words!”
- “Sharing is caring!”
- “You get what you get and you don't get upset!”
- “You're okay!”
- “Be careful!”
- “We don't do that!” / “No thank you!”
- “Good Job!”
- “Say Sorry!”
- “Practice Makes Perfect!”
- “Because I Said So!”

# “Use Your Words!”

The phrase “use your words” is often used by adults to encourage children to express themselves verbally rather than resorting to tantrums, whining, or other non-verbal expressions of frustration. However, this phrase can be ineffective for several reasons:

- **Assumes Ability Without Support:** Simply telling a child to “use your words” assumes that they have the vocabulary and communication skills to express their feelings or needs adequately. Young children, especially those still developing language skills, may not have the words or ability to articulate their emotions or thoughts effectively (especially if they’re dysregulated or in a high emotional state).
- **May Feel Invalidating:** In moments of distress or frustration, being told to “use your words” can feel dismissive or invalidating to a child's emotions. It may not address the underlying reason for behaviors or provide the support they need to manage feelings.
- **Lacks Guidance or Modeling:** Children learn best through modeling and guidance. Simply instructing them to use words doesn't teach them how to identify and express their emotions constructively. It overlooks the opportunity for adults to teach emotional literacy and communication skills.

## Alternatives:

- **Offer Assistance:** Provide specific suggestions or options for how they can express themselves. For instance, “Can you tell me/show me what's bothering you?”
- **Model Communication:** Demonstrate how to label and express emotions. For example, “I feel frustrated when things don't go as planned. How about you?” or provide the appropriate feelings and language, e.g. “You're reaching for your water cup. It looks like you're thirsty. Let's fill up your cup with water.” This response acknowledges the child's action (reaching for the water cup), identifies the feeling (thirst), and provides a solution that meets the child's need (filling up the cup with water). It models appropriate vocabulary and helps the child connect their actions with their feelings, encouraging them to eventually verbalize their needs and feelings more independently.
- **Teach Problem-Solving:** Help children identify solutions or ways to address their feelings constructively. For instance, “Let's figure out together how we can solve this problem.”

# “Sharing is Caring!”

The phrase "sharing is caring" is often used to encourage young children to share their toys or belongings with others. However, its effectiveness can be limited for many reasons.

- **Developmental Readiness:** The concept of sharing involves complex social and cognitive skills, which young children may not fully grasp until around the age of 3 to 4 years old. Before and around this age, they are typically still developing the ability to understand ownership, empathy, and the concept of taking turns.
- **Coercive Nature and Resentment:** Telling children to share because "sharing is caring" can sometimes be coercive. It may lead to feelings of resentment or a sense of disconnect when their autonomy over their belongings is disregarded. Forced sharing can invalidate their feelings and experiences with the object, potentially causing negative associations with sharing (and the people involved).
- **Respect for Autonomy and Experience:** When adults force or guilt a child into passing an object to someone else, it disrespects the child's turn and their experiences with that object. It implies that their needs and preferences are secondary to the demands of others, which can lead to frustration and a reluctance to engage in sharing, and can even set the stage for future “people pleasing” behaviors.
  - Imagine you were in the middle of composing an email on your work laptop and your boss came in and said “give the laptop to Jane in 5 minutes” instead of saying, when you're done composing your email, can you give Jane a turn, please?” or consider, how would you feel if someone forced you to share your cell phone or beloved piece of jewelry with someone else?

## Alternatives:

- **Teach and Practice Turn-Taking:** Emphasize the importance of taking turns (instead of forced sharing) and waiting patiently. Use phrases such as, "It's your turn to play with the toy now. When you're done, it'll be someone else's turn."
- **Respecting Choices:** Acknowledge children's feelings and choices about sharing. Say, "It's okay if you're not ready to share right now. Let's find a way to take turns instead."
- **Positive Reinforcement:** Praise children when they demonstrate sharing behaviors or positive interactions with others. Say, "I noticed how you took turns with your friend. That was very kind of you!"

# “You Get What You Get & You Don't Get Upset!”

The phrase "You get what you get and you don't get upset" is often used to manage children's expectations and discourage complaints when they don't receive what they want. While the intention is to teach children to accept outcomes gracefully, it can be ineffective and even counterproductive for several reasons.

- **Invalidating Emotions:** This phrase can dismiss children's genuine feelings of disappointment or frustration, teaching them that their emotions are not valid or worthy of expression. Emotional regulation is a skill that needs nurturing, not suppression.
- **Lack of Empathy:** It does not acknowledge the child's perspective or experiences, making them feel unheard and misunderstood. Empathy from adults helps children learn to empathize with others.
- **Missed Learning Opportunity:** It overlooks the chance to teach problem-solving skills and resilience. Understanding why they feel upset and finding constructive ways to deal with those feelings are crucial life skills.

## Alternatives:

- **Validating Emotions:** Acknowledge children's feelings and let them know it's okay to feel upset. Say, "I see you're disappointed. It's okay to feel that way."
  - Remember you can (and should) hold boundaries AND validate the child's emotions.
- **Encouraging Expression:** Help children articulate their emotions. Use phrases like, "Can you tell me why you're upset?" or "What would make you feel better?"
- **Modeling Acceptance:** Demonstrate how to accept outcomes gracefully by showing empathy and understanding. For instance, "I also feel disappointed sometimes, but I try to find something positive about the situation, such as\_\_\_\_\_."
- **Teaching Problem-Solving:** Guide children in finding solutions or coping mechanisms. Say, "What can we do to feel better about this?" or "Let's think of something fun we can do instead."
- **Setting Realistic Expectations:** Prepare children for potential outcomes in advance to manage their expectations. For example, "There are many children here, so we might not get exactly what we want."

# "You're Okay!"

The phrase "You're okay!" is often used by adults to quickly reassure children after a minor injury, scare, or emotional upset. While the intention is to provide comfort and minimize distress, it can be ineffective and even counterproductive for several reasons.

- **Invalidating Emotions:** Telling a child "You're okay" can dismiss their genuine feelings of pain, fear, or sadness. It suggests that their emotions are not valid or important.
- **Lack of Empathy:** This phrase does not acknowledge the child's perspective or experience, making them feel unheard and misunderstood. Children need to feel that their feelings are recognized and respected.
- **Hindering Emotional Expression:** It can discourage children from expressing their emotions, teaching them to suppress their feelings rather than addressing and processing them.
- **Confusing Messages:** If a child feels pain or fear and is told they are okay, it can create confusion between what they feel and what they are being told, potentially leading to distrust in their own emotions.

## Alternatives:

- **Validating Emotions:** Acknowledge the child's feelings and let them know it's okay to feel upset or hurt. Say, "I see that you're hurt/scared/upset. It's okay to feel that way."
- **Providing Comfort:** Offer physical comfort like a hug or gentle touch and use soothing words. Say, "I'm here with you. Let's take a moment to calm down together."
- **Encouraging Expression:** Help the child articulate their emotions and experience. Use phrases like, "Can you tell me what happened?" or "Where does it hurt?"
- **Empathizing:** Show understanding and empathy. Say, "That must have been really scary for you" or "It looks like that hurt a lot."
- **Teaching Coping Skills:** Guide the child in finding ways to soothe themselves or solve the problem. Say, "Let's take some deep breaths together" or "Would you like some ice for that bump?"

# “Be Careful!”

The phrase "Be careful!" is frequently used by adults to warn children about potential dangers and encourage cautious behavior. While the intention is to keep children safe, this phrase can be ineffective and even counterproductive for several reasons:

- **Lack of Specificity:** "Be careful!" is vague and does not provide clear instructions on what the child should be cautious about. Without specific guidance, children may not understand what behavior needs to change.
- **Inducing Anxiety:** Constantly hearing "Be careful!" can make children overly anxious and fearful of trying new things or exploring their environment. This can inhibit their natural curiosity and learning.
- **Undermining Confidence:** Repeated warnings can signal to children that they are not trusted to handle situations on their own, potentially undermining their confidence and independence.
- **Ineffective Communication:** Children may tune out frequent warnings, especially if they become accustomed to hearing "Be careful!" without understanding its relevance.
- **Missed Learning Opportunities:** It doesn't teach children about risk assessment or how to navigate potentially hazardous situations effectively.

## Alternatives:

- **Encourage Awareness:** Guide children to observe their surroundings and think about potential dangers. E.g., "The floor looks wet up ahead. How might you move around it?"
- **Teach Problem-Solving:** Equip children with strategies to handle risky situations safely. E.g.: "If the ball rolls into the street, ask an adult for help instead of running after it."
- **Promote Confidence:** Reinforce the child's ability to manage situations safely. Use phrases like, "I trust you to climb carefully. If you need help, I'm right here."
- **Selective Warnings:** Only provide warnings when there is a true, observable danger/hazard. Allow children to explore and take healthy risks without feeling the constant need to monitor or dictate their experiences. Trust in their ability to learn from their environment, to fall and get back up again, & develop their own risk assessment skills.

# “We Don’t Do That / No Thank You!”

The phrases “We don’t do that!” and “No thank you!” are commonly used to discourage undesirable behavior in children. While the intention is to correct behavior politely, these phrases can be ineffective and even counterproductive for several reasons:

- **Lack of Explanation:** These phrases do not provide children with an understanding of why their behavior is inappropriate. Without an explanation, children may not learn the reasons behind the rules or the impact of their actions.
- **Missed Teaching Opportunity:** Simply saying “We don’t do that!” or “No thank you!” misses the chance to teach children what they should do instead, offering no guidance on desirable or appropriate behavior.
- **Potential for Misunderstanding:** Children might not always understand the context or severity of their behavior when corrected with such vague phrases, leading to repeated undesirable behaviors.
- **Lack of Empathy:** These phrases do not acknowledge the child’s feelings or motivations, potentially leading to frustration or a sense of being misunderstood.

## Alternatives:

- **Be Specific & Offer Alternatives:** Clearly state what behavior is inappropriate and why. Say, “We don’t throw toys because it can hurt someone, but we can roll a ball instead.”
- **Explain Consequences:** Help children understand the impact of their behavior. Say, “When you yell, it hurts our ears. Let’s use a quieter voice like this...”
- **Acknowledge Feelings:** Recognize the child’s emotions and provide a solution. Say, “I see you’re upset. Can you tell me what’s wrong so we can fix it together?”
- **Teach Problem-Solving:** Encourage children to think of better ways to handle situations. Use phrases like, “What else can we do if we’re feeling frustrated?”

# “Good Job!”

The phrase "Good job!" is often used by adults to praise children and encourage positive behavior. While the intention is to boost confidence and motivate children, this phrase can be ineffective and even counterproductive for several reasons:

- **Lack of Specificity:** "Good job!" is a vague form of praise that does not provide children with specific feedback on what they did well. Without clear information, children may not understand what behaviors to repeat.
- **External Validation:** Over-reliance on "Good job!" can make children dependent on external validation for their self-worth, rather than developing intrinsic motivation and self-assessment skills.
- **Generalization:** This phrase can become overused and lose its meaning, making it less impactful over time. Children may start to ignore it or not take it seriously.
- **Missed Learning Opportunities:** Simply saying "Good job!" misses the chance to highlight the effort, strategies, or specific actions that led to the positive outcome, which are important for learning and development.
- **Undermining Resilience:** Praising outcomes without acknowledging the effort or process can lead children to avoid challenges or become discouraged when they encounter difficulties, undermining their resilience and perseverance.

## Alternatives:

- **Praise the Process:** Highlight the strategies and steps the child took. Use phrases like, "You did a great job figuring out that puzzle by trying different pieces."
- **Encourage Self-Assessment:** Ask children how they feel about their work to promote self-reflection. Say, "What do you think about your project?"
- **Promote Growth Mindset:** Encourage children to see challenges as opportunities to grow. Say, "I can see you didn't give up even when it was tough. That's amazing!"
- **Show Genuine Interest:** Engage with the child's activity and ask questions. For example, "Tell me more about your painting. What inspired you?"

# "Say Sorry"

The phrase "Say sorry" is commonly used by adults to prompt children to apologize for inappropriate behavior or conflicts. While the intention is to teach children manners and empathy, this phrase can be ineffective and even counterproductive for several reasons:

- **Lack of Genuine Understanding:** Forcing a child to say "sorry" without understanding why they are apologizing can result in insincere apologies. Children may not grasp the impact of their actions or the importance of making amends.
- **Surface-Level Resolution:** This phrase focuses on the words rather than the underlying feelings or behavior. It can lead to a superficial resolution without addressing the root cause of the conflict or behavior.
- **Missed Empathy Development:** Simply saying "sorry" does not help children develop empathy or learn how to make things right. It bypasses the process of understanding the other person's feelings and repairing the relationship.
- **Resentment and Resistance:** Forcing children to apologize can create resentment or resistance, especially if they don't feel sorry. This can undermine their willingness to engage in genuine reconciliation in the future.
- **Behavior Repetition:** Without understanding the reason for the apology, children are less likely to change their behavior. They may repeat the same actions, thinking a simple "sorry" will always suffice.

## Alternatives:

- **Model Apologizing:** Demonstrate how to give a sincere apology yourself. For example, "I'm sorry I interrupted you. That wasn't fair to you."
- **Encourage Empathy:** Help children understand the impact of their actions. Say, "When we take something from others, it can upset them. Let's talk about taking turns..."
- **Promote Emotional Expression:** Encourage children to express their feelings and listen to others. Use phrases like, "Can you tell me why you did that?" and "Let's hear how your friend feels."
- **Give Time:** Allow children time to calm down and reflect before expecting an apology. Say, "Let's take a break and talk about this when we're feeling calmer."

# "Practice Makes Perfect!"

The phrase "Practice makes perfect" is often used by adults to encourage children to keep practicing a skill until they achieve mastery. While the intention is to motivate persistence and improvement, this phrase can be ineffective & counterproductive for several reasons:

- **Unrealistic Expectations:** The idea of achieving "perfection" can set unrealistic standards for children, leading to frustration and disappointment when perfection is not attained.
- **Fear of Failure:** Emphasizing perfection can make children fear mistakes and failures, discouraging them from trying new things or taking risks.
- **Pressure and Stress:** The pursuit of perfection can create undue pressure and stress, making practice feel like a burden rather than a positive and enjoyable experience.
- **Fixed Mindset:** This phrase can contribute to a fixed mindset, where children believe their abilities are static and that they must be perfect to be successful, rather than focusing on growth and learning.
- **Overemphasis on Outcome:** "Practice makes perfect" focuses on the end result rather than the learning process, which can undermine the value of effort, persistence, and incremental improvement.

## Alternatives:

- **Encourage Persistence & Growth Mindset:** Reinforce the value of sticking with a task and seeing it through. Use phrases like, "It's great that you're not giving up. Keep practicing, and you'll keep getting better."
- **Celebrate Effort:** Acknowledge the hard work and dedication put into practice. Use phrases like, "I can see you're working really hard on this."
- **Normalize Mistakes:** Reassure children that making mistakes is a natural part of learning. Use phrases like, "Mistakes help us learn and improve."
- **Enjoy the Process:** Promote the enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from practicing. Use phrases like, "Isn't it fun to see how much we've improved?"

# “Because I Said So!”

The phrase “Because I said so” is often used by adults to assert authority and end a child's questioning or resistance. While the intention is to enforce rules and obedience, this phrase can be ineffective and even counterproductive for several reasons:

- **Lack of Explanation:** This phrase does not provide children with an understanding of the reasoning behind a rule or decision, which can hinder their ability to learn and internalize appropriate behavior.
- **Stifles Curiosity:** Children are naturally curious and want to understand the world around them. This phrase shuts down their curiosity and discourages them from asking questions or seeking understanding.
- **Fosters Resentment:** Using this phrase can create feelings of resentment or frustration in children, as it feels dismissive and authoritarian, leading to power struggles and resistance.
- **Missed Teaching Opportunity:** It bypasses the chance to teach children critical thinking, problem-solving, and the importance of rules, depriving them of valuable learning moments.
- **Undermines Trust:** Consistently using this phrase can erode trust between the adult and the child, as it conveys a lack of respect for the child's thoughts and feelings.

## Alternatives:

- **Set Clear Boundaries:** Establish and communicate clear rules and expectations in advance. Use phrases like, “In our house, we always wash our hands before eating.”
- **Provide Reasons (While still upholding the boundary):** Explain the reasoning behind rules and decisions. Say, “We need to leave the park now because it's time for lunch.”
- **Acknowledge Feelings:** Recognize and validate the child's feelings and perspective. Use phrases like, “I know you want to keep playing, but it's time for bed to ensure you get enough rest.”
- **Empower Autonomy:** Offer choices within boundaries to give children a sense of control. Use phrases like, “You can choose to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt today.”



The language adults use with children profoundly shapes their socio-emotional development, influencing both immediate interactions and long-term outcomes. When adults communicate with specificity, encouragement, and empathy, they create environments where children feel valued and understood. This type of positive communication helps children develop self-esteem by recognizing their efforts and achievements in meaningful ways. It also fosters resilience by teaching children to learn from setbacks and challenges, rather than focusing solely on achieving perfection. Additionally, empathetic communication helps children understand and respect the feelings of others, nurturing their ability to form positive relationships and navigate social interactions effectively.

By emphasizing these aspects of communication, adults not only support children in their immediate growth but also lay the foundation for their long-term emotional well-being and success. Children who experience consistent, positive communication are more likely to develop into confident, empathetic individuals who can handle life's complexities with resilience and compassion. Therefore, the language adults choose plays a critical role in shaping children's attitudes, behaviors, and relationships, influencing their overall development and future opportunities.



**MADE FOR CHILDREN. DESIGNED FOR YOU.**

Proprietary and confidential content of We Skoolhouse LLC. Intended for recipient use only. Do not reproduce, distribute, and/or adapt any part of the content. All rights reserved. Copyright We Skoolhouse LLC

[Weschoolhouse.com](https://weschoolhouse.com)



All Rights Reserved