



MELBOURNE INFANT SCHOOL

Head Teacher: Mrs C Gibbs

Email: enquiries@melbourne-inf.derbyshire.sch.uk

Website: www.melbourne-inf.derbyshire.sch.uk

Packhorse Road
Melbourne
Derby
DE73 8JE
Tel: 01332 862325

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POSITIVE LANGUAGE POLICY

What is Positive Language?

Positive Language is more than giving praise. It is part of the process of self-concept enhancement, building self-awareness and feelings of self-worth in our pupils. It is about creating a climate in which our pupils feel valued and secure so that their self-image and self-awareness can improve and flourish. It is about reducing the number of occasions in which our pupils feel put down and threatened. It is about eradicating vagueness and uncertainty so that our pupils know what we want them to do and what is expected of them. It is about making both pupil and teacher feel better about themselves.

In order to do this positive language should become part of every interaction in the school day between adult/adult, adult/child and child/child. Some ways to this are as follows:

1. To give direction

a) Identifying what we want the child to do

We frequently tell children what we don't want them to do e.g. - "Don't shout out" tells a child what we do not want him/her to do but it does not tell him/her what we want him/her to do. So, if instead of saying "Don't shout out" we say - "Please put your hand up" we are telling him/her exactly what we want him/her to do. We are giving a positive directive.

So, "Don't shout out" = negative

"Put your hand up" = positive

"Don't do" = negative

"Do" = positive

b) Reducing options

When we are giving positive directions e.g. "Please put your hand up" or "Sit on your chair please", we are telling a child exactly what we want them to do, and therefore giving them less chance not to comply - the more specific we are in our direction, the less chance there is for the child not to do as we ask.

The **Reducing Options** appendix gives ideas of the options we are leaving open to a child when we give negative directives.

Now because the child is being directed towards what the adult wants them to do (rather than don't do), they begin to feel less insecure. Times when they don't really understand what is expected of them, through vague statements are less and less, there are fewer chances of



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negative behaviour and the guesswork is taken out of our directives. This, in turn, is likely to lead to more success for the child, and so more praise and self-image starts to improve.

Sometimes, we give seemingly positive directives e.g. line up at the door or put your books away, which can cause all kinds of problems because they are not specific enough. There is still too much opportunity for pupils to engage in their own options in carrying out this type of directive. **So be specific - be positive.**

2. To avoid confrontation

Many children who have a poor self-image find many things adults say very threatening because they believe they are in a "fail" or "lose face" situation, so they can become verbally aggrieved or non-co-operative in order to cope with these feelings. Again, positive language can be used to avoid these situations.

For example:

"You can't go out to play until you have finished your maths" is both negative and vague. A child may well find this threatening and confrontational and may well re-act accordingly.

However, if you say:

"You can go out to play when you have finished No's 3, 4 and 5" - you are actually saying exactly the same thing but the language is different - it is now very positive -

"You can go out to play" - and very specific "do no's 3, 4 and 5". Consequently, it's much less threatening and confrontational. The child is far more likely to do as you ask willingly because they are not in a "fail" or "lose face" situation and feel better about themselves.

Thus, they may well succeed, good about themselves and there is no confrontation or, at least, there is likely to be less confrontation.

3. To sort conflict

Children get into conflict or potential conflict situations throughout the day e.g. knocking over things, pushing, pulling, kicking, fighting etc. As adults, we frequently tackle these situations with "why did you do that?" type questions. When we ask this type of question (a why question) we often don't get very far because:

- a) We are asking child to examine their motives and emotions and they may not have the skills to do this.
- b) The child sees the situation as a threat because they don't really understand what you want them to say and they haven't the skills to cope with the uncertainty and abstract content of the question.



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So, the reaction to "Why did you do that?" is likely to be a shoulder shrug, an accusation, "I don't know", verbal abuse of something so nonsensical as to be a waste of time.

To ask **what** questions rather than **why** is much more positive, For instance, if instead of "Why did you do that?" you ask "What happened?" - you are not necessarily asking a child to expose his feelings and emotions (a threat) but to give a factual account, which is far less threatening, and something the child is far more likely to be able to do.

It is essential to listen to both sides of the story, in a non-judgemental way, without allowing one child to interrupt another so they can see the "fairness" of what is happening.

To continue the positive approach further it would be a good idea to ask the children concerned what they could have done instead of e.g. fighting, kicking etc. This also gives you the opportunity to offer more acceptable ways of behaving and sorting conflict.

4. To avoid conflict/confrontation between adult/child

Adults can unwittingly spark conflict and confrontation situations when we put child at the centre of the blame. For instance, if a child swears at you, you could say "You naughty child" or "You rude child". In this way, you are putting the child to the forefront of the blame and confirming, very often, their already poor image of themselves. The message that goes to the child is "I DON'T LIKE YOU".

A more positive approach is to take the heat off the child and put yourself to the forefront of the exchange by talking about yourself, by making "I" statements.

So, instead of "You rude child" you say something like "I don't like it when children swear at me" or "It makes me feel angry when I hear that word".

This way you are taking the heat off the child as an individual and putting it on you. The child is far less likely to adopt a confrontational stance - you still make your point but the child does not lose face - you both win.

The message you get across is:

I LIKE YOU - I DON'T LIKE WHAT YOU ARE DOING

It is a good idea to learn a few phases of this nature so that they become second nature to you and part of your immediate responses to a child - that way you have to think less about what to say.

5. To moderate unacceptable behaviour



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Children frequently disregard directives or engage in off-task activities which are annoying to the adults and distracting to other children. It is easy then to embark on constantly repeating a whole range of instructions to get the children to do as you wish.

So, "You're making too much noise over there" could be repeated six or seven times in ten minutes and is quite likely to be ignored. The adult becomes more agitated and the children get a great deal of attention for unacceptable behaviour or for being uncooperative.

A more positive approach might be to praise very openly those children who are doing what you want them to do. So instead of giving your attention to the uncooperative children you are giving attention to the co-operatives ones and you are rewarding acceptable behaviour.

So, for instance, you might say:

"Well done the children on this table, you have done exactly as I asked" or "These children here are sitting ready, well done".

It is also more positive to make statements which highlight acceptable behaviour rather than unacceptable behaviour with the whole class. So, for instance, "Those children who are ready can go to play (lunch, next activity etc)" is more positive and rewards acceptable behaviour more than "those children who aren't ready, can't go to play" etc.

When a child is disregarding directives when sitting next to other children, it is very effective to praise those children who are sitting nearest to them and are doing as requested. This is much more powerful than persistent requests of one child who is not doing as asked. This praise can then be followed by a repetition of the directive to the child and more praise for those who are.

Someone once said - a child would rather be punished and be sure of getting attention than get no attention at all - we want to prevent this from happening by giving attention for acceptable behaviour.

6. Praise and approval

In the business of helping children to be more self-aware, have higher self-esteem and to feel more secure, praise and approval are very powerful weapons.

Even with the most difficult children, there is always something you can find to praise.

Certainly, we expect children to do as we ask but do not take this for granted. Some children may be in real turmoil or under great stress so that to do what you have asked takes a great deal of effort.

You may expect children to do as you ask but also be prepared to praise them for it.



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Approval is as vital as praise.

Suppose, for instance, a child comes into school late. He's had a difficult morning, he got up late, didn't get washed properly, had no breakfast, his mum and older brother both shouted at him, he fell over on the way to school, realised he left his reading book behind etc. He arrives at school feeling confused, hurt and angry. He comes into the classroom to be greeted by "Oh, it's you John, late again. That's twice this week you've been late, Well, go and sit down" Imagine how that makes him feel. But if he's greeted with a smile and "Hello John, that's a nice jumper you've got on, Come and sit down". He is going to feel much better about himself, is far more likely to feel valued and accepted. Feeling good, or at least better about himself, he is far more likely to be co-operative.

Praise throughout the day is important to reassure children that they are right.

However, praise must be appropriate. Do not praise for things that do not merit praise because that devalues praise when it is given.

Praise and approval does not always have to be verbal. Body language is very powerful and a smile, a nod, a pat on the shoulder etc. can convey as much approval and reassurance as the spoken word.

A good rule to remember is:

Reproach in private

Praise in public

7. Keep language simple

As a major reason for positive language and a positive approach is to improve self-awareness, self-image and feelings of security, it is important to keep language simple and to break down instructions into small units so that the children can easily understand exactly what you want from them.

Make no assumptions that they understand what you mean or the words you are using.

So the simpler the language the better it will be and check they really do understand what you are saying. This is particularly important with very young children but appropriate to every age range. For very young children, you may need to model the things you want done along with the words you use.

8. A school policy

It is important that positive language should become part of every interaction in the school day.



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If this is possible, it is vital that it is incorporated into School Policy so that every adult in the building is using positive language consistently in every area of the curriculum and every part of the school day.

If you are using positive language consistently, you are going to bring out real and positive changes in your pupils' self-esteem and security, but, if when they leave you, they are subject to some of the negative language referred to, then some of your good work is going to be undermined and you have to work all the harder to restore it.

If everyone in the building is using positive language, then there is a consistent approach to achieving the goal of having self-assured, happy and secure pupils. A whole team approach is required and it will make your positive approach a great deal more positive.

Remember: - Positive Language really does work as part of an overall, consistent and positive approach but it may take time so be patient and keep trying!

Policy Review

This policy to be reviewed every 3 years

Positive Management Approaches to Reduce Options - Appendix

Part of having a positive attitude/approach in the classroom is to do with reducing the options left open to child/ren.

The objectives are:

- 1) To establish well defined parameters of acceptable behaviour which leads to
- 2) Security and the child is in no doubt as to what is expected of them
- 3) To reduce conflict situations by not allowing the pupil/pupils (or the teacher) to escalate minor misdemeanours or irritating behaviour into conflict situations.

To do this the teacher needs to:

- 1) Identify exactly what it is they would like the pupil/s to be doing and
- 2) Give positive precise directions.

For example:

A negative request "Don't push your pencil up your nose" - leaves the child with endless options. He may obey the initial request and take his pencil down from his nose, so is doing what the



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teacher asked but that doesn't stop him from going on to do many other horrendous things with his pencil: e.g. putting it in his ear/writing on his desk, chair etc. throwing it on the floor/chewing it to pieces etc., because the request did not say

what it was that the teacher wanted him to do with the pencil, e.g. write your name/draw your picture/put it on the desk.

So the negative direction "Don't put your pencil up your nose" may be obeyed but still leaves the pupil with too many options. A positive command e.g. "Please put your pencil on your desk" or a curriculum based direction "Please start to draw your picture now" leaves the pupil with only two options:

- 1) He either follows the precise direction and does what has been identified as the desired task or
- 2) He openly disobeys you.

Some possible commands	Possible options
Don't throw the lego/bricks/crayons etc.	Throwing something else or : putting it in mouth/chewing it/ flicking it/skimming it onto floor/ hiding it etc.
Don't run	Skipping/hopping/shuffling/ falling/tripping/pushing
Stop whistling/don't whistle	singing/humming/giggling/ making noises/blowing down nose