

this set of minerals?” “Who heard an idea from someone else that they’d like to try?” “How will you help each other do your best learning today?” “How can we take care of each other when we go out to play kickball?” “What would you like to learn about Native Americans?”

These are all questions and statements that influence children to become curious and engaged learners and to respect and value their peers. Our careful choice of words and tone leads children to build positive relationships with their learning and with fellow learners.

## THE GOALS OF TEACHER LANGUAGE

Skillful teacher language is language that supports students in three broad ways: gaining academic skills and knowledge, developing self-control, and building their sense of community. Across all of these areas, language is a tool that helps teachers articulate a vision, convey faith that students can attain it, give feedback that names students’ strengths, and offer guidance that extends students’ skills.

### **Gaining Academic Skills and Knowledge**

Most of the language we use professionally is aimed at helping students develop academic skills and increase their knowledge.

#### ***Encouraging habits and strategies that lead to learning***

“I wonder how many different things we can observe about this bird’s nest” fosters in children the skill of careful observation and the attitude of curiosity. “What are you most proud of about your work?” encourages reflection and self-critique. “It seems like you’re using context clues to figure that word out” helps the child become conscious of a useful strategy that she might use again in the future.

#### ***Helping children learn from each other***

Our language can also help children learn from each other and engage in ways that stretch their academic skills and knowledge. Vygotsky calls this

reaching into their “zone of proximal development,” or that space between what they can do on their own and what they can do with help from someone a step or two more skilled (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, a child who can’t read a book on her own might be able to read it with a classmate who is at a higher reading level. The classmate might supply words the child doesn’t know or take turns reading paragraphs with her. The two might discuss their ideas and questions about the book.

All this pulls the less skilled child toward more complex reading and deepens the other child’s skills as well. But in order for this kind of deep, constructive engagement to happen, students need to trust and respect each other, and a teacher’s language is vital in helping the class build that trust and respect.

### ***Influencing children to use language skillfully themselves***

Finally, a by-product of a teacher’s skillful use of language is that the students often begin using language more skillfully themselves. For example, if in giving feedback on students’ work a teacher routinely names specific positives she notices (for example, by saying “You used a metaphor that makes the reader think”) rather than issuing global praise (such as “Good job!”), students may soon adopt that way of speaking when giving feedback to each other. (See Chapter Five for more on this kind of reinforcing language.)

When the teacher models good listening by using pauses and paraphrasing, children are likely to learn to do the same. (See Chapter Four for more on skillful listening.) The result is that the classroom becomes a richer place of cooperative learning, with children more actively helping each other grow.

## **Developing Self-Control**

It’s safe to say that all teachers want their students to learn self-control. The key word here is “learn.” We’re not born with self-control; we learn it as we grow. There are critical conditions that facilitate this learning. As psychologist Edward Deci explains, to develop self-control, children have to have a growing sense of autonomy and competence—a sense that they are controlled by themselves rather than by a force from outside, and a sense that they are capable of achieving desired outcomes (Deci & Flaste, 1995).

Our job as teachers is to help children develop this sense of autonomy and competence. We do this by giving them opportunities to become aware of themselves—what they do well, what they’re interested in, how they’re feeling, how they’re changing—for children need to have this self-awareness in order to make conscious choices about their behavior. We also do it by giving them opportunities to practice generating ideas, making decisions, following through, and reflecting on the results.

Language plays a huge role in this equation. We can use words that reveal specific positive behaviors and skills we noticed, or words that offer only unrevealing generalities. We can use a tone of voice that encourages children to practice the skills that lead to autonomy and competence, or a tone that does the opposite.

### ***Simple language can be effective***

It can be effective to simply say “I see you’re working hard to add details” in a warm, calm voice. To a child who struggles with doing thorough work, this may be enough to provide motivation. To a child who is impulsively flicking paper at classmates during quiet work time, we can say firmly yet kindly, “What should you be doing right now?” or “Show me how you will follow our rules for quiet work time.” When a child begins to act out because he doesn’t know how to solve a math problem, we might say calmly, “What’s a way we talked about for handling frustration if you don’t get something right away?”

These simple reminders help students develop and reinforce a repertoire of constructive behaviors. They show faith in students and prompt them to draw upon their own resources to remember behavioral expectations and act on them. In this way, they help students experience autonomy and competence and develop self-control.

## **Building a Sense of Community**

In addition to a sense of autonomy and competence, we all have a basic human need to feel a sense of belonging (Deci & Flaste, 1995). For children in a classroom, this feeling is critical if they are to be motivated from within to learn. When they feel safe and valued, they’re more willing to do

the risk-taking and the cooperative give-and-take that lead to greater learning (Jensen, 2005).

We can foster all students' sense of belonging by using language that encourages everyone to value and practice cooperation, respect, and empathy. Following a science activity, a teacher says cheerfully but without gushing, "I noticed cleanup went quickly today because you were all helping each other." This gives children feedback about aspects of their behavior that were helpful.

Early in the year, a teacher initiates a class discussion about how to honor the classroom rule "Be kind to each other" when children are at recess. Children discuss various ways they can treat each other kindly on the playground. The teacher then describes a common playground situation—a child asking to join a game and being told "no." In a matter-of-fact voice he asks, "How might it feel to be told 'no' when you ask to join a game?"

This encourages the children to imagine feelings they have not yet felt or to share feelings they have felt. With such language, teachers can guide students to behave in ways that allow all classmates to participate fully in classroom life and to see all classmates as members of their community.

## THE PROCESS OF CHANGING OUR LANGUAGE

Learning to use teacher language to its full positive potential means becoming aware of our habitual ways of speaking and the messages, positive or negative, that these may be sending to students. It means stepping back to "hear" ourselves and reflect, "What do I say? What tone do I use?" We can then try on and practice new words, phrases, tones, and paces to replace any ineffective language patterns we may be using. Appendix B describes a language change process and offers tips that can help along the way.

This process of language change can feel different to different people. For some, a new way of speaking comes relatively quickly. For others, it's a slower evolution.

A number of teachers say that using new teacher language feels awkward or "phony" and "contrived" at first. Be assured that it just feels that way

because we're not used to it. If our intention behind the words is positive—if we truly believe in students' desire and ability to learn and to behave in helpful ways—our communication will feel sincere to them, even if it isn't technically polished or if it still sounds foreign to us.

For some teachers, perhaps especially those who've been teaching for a while, the awkwardness may be particularly unsettling because we're dealing with teaching, our field of expertise—an area of life that we're knowledgeable about, precisely the area in which we're not supposed to be awkward. This is an understandable reaction. It can help to remember that feeling unsettled or awkward is often a necessary and natural stage in learning and will pass with practice.

Whether language change comes quickly or slowly, the prize is a more satisfying way to teach. Our classrooms become places where children learn to take care of themselves, their learning, each other, and the world in a different, more joyful way.

In short, better language makes us better teachers and our students better learners.