

The Power of Language

A child learns many things from the language people in her life speak to and around her. From the first days of life the baby is surrounded by talk and begins to figure out which sounds and words are part of her native language. Later, she starts to learn the rules for putting those words together into sentences and masters the grammar of her language. Along the way she will adopt the intonations and accents of her linguistic community and if that community has its own particular dialect, she will become proficient in that as well. She might also learn certain words and expressions that her parents may, or may not, be happy that she has adopted as her own. Starting with the cries of a newborn infant, in a few short years a child develops a fairly extensive vocabulary and knowledge of the rules of the language. All of this happens because people in her life speak to and around her.

In addition to learning how the linguistic system works, a child also learns something else from hearing language; she learns what there is in her environment and experience that is worth paying attention to. In many ways, language is a “setter of values.” As we move through our days there are more sights, sounds, people, and feelings that we have the ability to attend to. If we weren’t able to selectively attend to our experiences we might not be able to function. Going for a walk, for example, would be next to impossible if we had to attend to every possible sight and sound bombarding us on our path. Some of this selective attention develops as a result of people using language to suggest what it is in the world that *should* have our attention.

Consider this hypothetical scenario. Imagine that as a parent you spend time traveling around town with your young child. Sometimes these journeys are on foot and sometimes in a car. Now imagine that each time you pass a person with red hair, you make a point of saying to your child, “Look at that person with red hair.” That’s all you say. What might your child be learning from this? She might be learning that for some reason the world is divided up into people with, and people without, red hair. She may not know why this division is important but your language has drawn her attention to it and has communicated that there is some value to making this distinction.

The ability to focus attention is one of the great powers of language, a power that adults need to wield very carefully. We need to reflect on our own language use. Are we communicating and transferring our own prejudices and fears, for example, by how we use language to point children's attentions in certain directions? Do we use language to talk about the past and future so that children realize they can transcend their present circumstances? Do we use phrases like, "I wonder..." and "I need to think about that..." so children come to realize that they can step back and consider a problem and not act impulsively? When we are out in the world with our children, do we use our language to draw their attention to the wonders of nature, the beauty of architecture, or the kind acts of people? Or are we so focused on the task at hand (or the smartphone in our hand) that the only language our child hears, if she hears any at all, is the kind that admonishes and corrects her behavior?

Sounds. Words. Grammar. These are the building blocks of language. Once mastered, language becomes a powerful tool for communication and for drawing people's attention to what we may think is worth paying attention to. It is a power we need to use thoughtfully because as the musical theater composer, Stephen Sondheim wrote in his show, *Into the Woods*: "Careful the things you say. Children will listen."

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