

Make ‘Em, Don’t Break ‘Em: The Power of Words and Labels

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From birth children are labeled, motivated and sometimes stifled by words. In the home, community or school, it is obvious that children cannot escape words and their influence. This article describes the processes and the effects of words on children’s journey to adulthood and underscores the importance of educators’ understanding of positive messages.

It Begins with a Name

The term “violence” has traditionally been defined as a physically aggressive act (Olweus, 1999). However, it has been argued that in modern society, thanks in part to the media, violence has developed an inflated meaning that has “grouped together not only physical aggression, extortion and vandalism, but also what is known as incivility: insulting talk, bad language, pushing and shoving, name calling, humiliation” (Debarbieux, 2001, p. 15).

Labeling and disparaging words have been accused of initiating negative self-concepts, less positive interaction with teachers, more teacher criticism, reduced levels of interest by parents, negative stereotyping by teachers and learned helplessness by students (Gelfand, Jensen, & Drew, 1988; Gillung & Rucker, 1977; and Kuther, 1994). Our childhood is filled with taunts and followed by the automatic refrain “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Little did we perceive that they were really “killing us softly with their words.” Guiley (1999) suggests that even as children we knew differently. We knew

names and words can, indeed, hurt us. She notes that words don’t break our physical bones, but they can break our spirits, our pride and our confidence. Words can bring us down and echo within us for years after they are spoken.

Papazoglou (2003) concludes words do affect our lives in dramatic ways. Words are what actors, politicians, businessmen, marketers, diplomats, writers, and other influential people use to gain loyalty and influence. Each recognizes the power of the well positioned word. Most, if not all, of the recognizable authorities in virtually every industry credit their success to the power of words (Papazoglou, 2003). Yet as educators we often do not seem to recognize the extent of the influence of words.

According to Tauber (1998), teachers form expectations for students based upon such characteristics as body build, gender, race, ethnicity, given name and or surname, attractiveness, dialect, and socioeconomic level. Once we label a person, it affects what we assume that person is like, placing some students at a definite advantage while placing others at a definite disadvantage (Good,

1987; Hunsberger & Cananagh, 1988; Brehm & Kassin, 1996). The first impact words have on the life of a child is the assigned name that will be the label for life. Herzig (1998) notes that one of the wonderful things about becoming parents is the ongoing debate between parents over what to name the child. Historically names were selected to reflect character and life expectancy of biblical characters. Names have long been recognized as reflecting character. Often we even apply a nickname that better fits one's personality or character.

Robles in Paul Canfield's *Ways to Enhance Self Concept in the Classroom* (1994) notes that names historically were passed down from one generation to another. She cites as examples first names like Phillip meant "Lover of horse," Peter meant "rock or stone," Henry meant "home ruler," Margaret meant "a pearl," and Judith meant "admired or praised." Last names like Cooper referred to "a man who made barrels," just as Smith meant "a blacksmith". By this and a myriad of others methods, we begin to ascribe characteristics, often not observable, to accompany certain names. The characterization power of words is dramatic when children are called ethnic and religious epithets or When called "liar," "cheater," "thief," "stupid," "dummy," or "dunce." Recognizing that negative associations and images are often evoked by personal names, Robles recommends we combat this by teaching youngsters to take pride in the names they have been given.

Four Types of Messages

Purkey (1991) combines the concept of invitations and disinvitations with the constructs intentionality and unintentionality to create four levels wherein people/educators function. They are:

1. *Intentionally disinventing*: At this level people purposely behave in a harmful and destructive level towards themselves and others. They intend to demean, degrade, and destroy the value and worth of themselves and others.

2. *Unintentionally disinventing*: At this level people behave in careless and thoughtless ways and their actions are seen as being disinventing toward others despite their best intentions. Their behaviors are ill-timed, poorly planned, misguided and extravagant. When messages are misinterpreted, gestures can be offensive and actions are unclear. While the harm is unintended the damage still occurs.

3. *Unintentionally Inviting*: At this level people note positive results but are uncertain what they did to achieve them. This leads to a lack of consistency.

4. *Intentionally Inviting*: This is the highest level of professional functioning. At this level people demonstrate an effective command of helping skills, a broad knowledge base and unconditional acceptance and regard for themselves and others. They consistently create messages and invitations enabling themselves and others to feel valued and worthwhile. These beneficial messages become the building blocks upon which to construct a healthy, well-functioning self-concept.

Purkey (1991) gives examples of unintentionally disinventing forces at work that can be seen in almost any school—the sign that reads: No Students Allowed In School Before 8:15 A.M. (although the temperature is below zero).

Harter (1986) offers a model of self-concept that has an impact on two factors, affect and motivation. Affect refers to the individual's

emotional state (happy and content vs. sad and depressed). His model implies a causal link between self-worth and affect, such that low self-worth produces negative affect and high self-worth would produce positive affect. The model also postulates a link between affect and motivation. In other words, a strong self-concept will be associated with a positive affective state and, in turn, high levels of motivation.

Edmonds first formally identified the Correlates of Effective Schools in 1982. He identified five correlates of effective schools that are likely to lead to academic success. One of the factors was “high expectations” for students. He proposes that students will rise or fall to our expectations. Wagner (1963) claims, “The ultimate function of a prophecy is not to tell the future, but to make it” (p. 66), and each time teachers size up or size down a student they are in effect, influencing that student’s future behavior and achievement. Expectations may alter more than the student’s actions. Teachers are affected by the expectations they have of students. If the expectations are positive and teachers expect the students to be successful, they will behave accordingly and guide their instruction so that success is obtained. But if they determine that students can’t or won’t achieve, effort on the teacher’s part often wanes accordingly.

Johnson (1992) notes that schooling facilitates the child’s emerging construction of self and that the language environment of school learning constitutes a social context that is essential to the development of selfhood. She adds “the potential that lies within each individual is realized only through social interaction” (p. 440). Scheffler (1991) indicates that the goal of each individual is maximal self-realization. Johnson (1992) notes, “it is therefore of utmost importance that careful attention be given to the quality

of these formal social interactive experiences and what the child can learn from them” (p. 440). She adds that as children become adept in using verbal symbols, they become more able to meet the behavioral demands and expectations of others. This underscores the need for high expectations expressed through our words and behavior since behavior speaks, too.

The development of self, however, does not begin in formal school; it begins in the home. It is here that “the self evolves and thrives in the course of significant social interaction” (Johnson, 1992, p. 439). While the majority of what most children hear is positive, there have been many instances where it was not. Some examples of unconsidered messages that can ring with negative tones: “You are no good just like your daddy,” “You act like a little sissy,” “You will never be anything,” and “You are so dumb.” It is apparent that many parents feel comfortable in using such demeaning negative language. These damaging remarks are often made during the early, formative years of the child’s life when he is forming his self-concept and his personality. Kelley (1962) stresses “the self feeds on ideas...which come from other people” (p. 15). Positive and negative thoughts are internalized and sometimes actualized. Mark Twain said that the difference between the right word and almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. If we purposely chose the wrong word or thoughtlessly chose words that limit potential.

Peers

Almost all children have nicknames, and many of them come from their peers. Some are complimentary, but many target explicit weaknesses. They are the most damaging and persistent occurrences of childhood.

Thus, we hear children assigning nicknames such as Stinky, Dog, Butterball, Dumbo, Big Head, Baldy, Fatso, Skinny, and Four Eyes. Canfield and Wells (1994) state, “there may not be a young person anywhere who has not felt the sting of another’s remark” (p. 78). Making fun of someone causes anguish and painful memories. American society, at least as portrayed in popular media, has embraced the mentality that encourages us to belittle, embarrass, and taunt simply for the sake of entertainment. The momentary exhilaration one may feel in humiliating someone is short-lived compared to the damage caused. People suffer when we care more about exercising our wit or using our glib tongues than we do about other people.

Children can be very cruel to one another. Colvin (2003) states that photographs of her as a child revealed that she was curly haired and cute. She states that she felt she was the product of an almost perfect childhood. However, by grade six almost everyone picked on her for reasons she did not understand. By high school the torment had solidified: a group of boys made it their habit to tell her every single day that she was stupid *and* ugly. Unfortunately, she believed them. She concludes, “It is amazing what you accept as truth when you hear it enough times” (p. 1). As a result, her confidence faltered and her self esteem withered away. She stopped talking in class, in groups, and in the hallways. She dreaded lunch hour, never stepped foot in the cafeteria, and the thought of class presentations literally made her sick. Bean (1992) calls this awareness of what others think of us (and our willingness to be influenced by it) connectiveness.

TV

Another influence on self is the entertainment industry in the form of television programming, films, and recorded music. De-

rogatory words are frequent and in some works, the dominant theme. These negative messages hurt all groups but particularly minorities. Individuals can tune-in to almost continuous music videos, songs, raps, and films. We have even created word to describe this “always on, always ready” lifestyle: “24/7” (24 hours a day, 7 days a week). Much of the medium is spoken in code, particularly in rap and hard rock venues. When are unraveled and understood, what we hear is usually derogatory to one group or another. In every venue, counterproductive and negative message compete with the values and virtues of kindness and caring. Too often, television humor teaches us that it is funny to ridicule and that ridicule has no influence on others. While we all know that feelings do really matter, television is still a powerful teacher and is one that can’t readily be dismissed from service and escaped by changing schools.

Caregivers

Caregivers are among society’s unsung and uncelebrated heroes. The work is continuous, the appreciation rare, the demands and stiff. But caregivers provide a profoundly service to the nation’s children in child care, preschool, public and private schools, athletic leagues, after school centers, and recreation centers. Unfortunately, at their worst, caregivers can be uncaring givers. At their worst, uncaring givers exacerbate the situation with remarks like “How can you be so stupid?” which translates into the child’s mind “I am stupid.” “I’m sick and tired of your behavior” may be decoded as “he doesn’t like me.” Miller (1982) notes that children have an increasing ability to see themselves as objects to which actions or thoughts are directed by verbal symbols. In the short version, Moustakas (1956) states succinctly that meaning is not given, it is constructed.

Language is the core, the key, the foundation of every class, subject, activity, the relationship. Language has many forms: the language of the textbooks, of print materials, of curriculum resources; of the language of daily events, of instructions, of directions, of announcements, of reactions, of questions, and of conversations. There is the language of feelings: the “life” and “death” of the spirit conveyed through verbal and nonverbal communication.

Chenfeld (1985) sees two types of teachers. A “Yes” teacher maintains a philosophy stamped with respect and regard for children. She contrasts the “Yes” teacher by describing a situation with a “No” teacher. In the latter situation, first graders were instructed to make a clock and be sure that all the numbers for the hours were written clearly. One child jumped into the assignment with enthusiasm. She carefully wrote the twelve numbers of the clock on a round paper plate. They were perfect, so beautiful that she decorated each number with a tiny flower around it. The teacher broke the spirit of the child by responding with a huge X across the face of the clock. Also angrily written, it scratched so deeply it tore the paper, was the message “Did not follow instructions.”

Chenfeld cites an old Yiddish custom: “When young children completed a page of study, their teacher dropped a dot of honey on the bottom of the page. The children were encouraged to dip their finger in the honey and taste its sweetness” (p. 268). She insists that learning should always be sweet. Whether learning will be sweet or not depends on the words, verbal or written, that we choose as educators.

Intentional or Not?

Thomas (1991) says “Most educators agree that the use of positive reinforcement can have a powerful impact on student behavior. They know when positive reinforcement is used consistently, it encourages desirable or appropriate behavior while modifying or extinguishing undesirable behavior” (p. 32). He adds:

The appropriate use of positive reinforcement is a vital skill in the overall pattern of delivering effective instruction. It can improve a student’s self-concept, promote participation in classroom activities, and modify or extinguish inappropriate behavior. Reinforcement can be physical like a pat on the back, or it can be nonverbal, like a smile or nod; but it has the most impact when it is given verbally. (p. 33)

In a longitudinal case study relating academic achievement to language, Juliebo and Elliott (1984) followed a child from birth to approximately age eight. They recorded his early success with learning language and reading skill, and then discussed his academic decline after being labeled a low achiever and a candidate for remedial classes. Given the label “remedial student” in grade two, this once bright, enthusiastic child adopted the label and behaved as a slow learner would. His school work continued to decline. A transfer to another school was the beginning of the child’s academic salvation. His teacher, using words, began to rebuild his self-concept, rewarding him for improved work and encouraging his endeavors. The school year ended with the child having B’s in all areas of language arts. By the end of grade four he was awarded a commendation as the “Most Improved Student” in front of the whole school. Juliebo and Elliott (1984) conclude the study noting that whether or not the child will continue to grow positively depends on whether he again will meet a

teacher who will destroy or nurture an already fragile self-concept.

Kirp (1974) observed that “adverse classification stigmatizes students, reducing both their self-image and their worth in the eyes of others” (pp. 12-13). Apple (1976) says we do not help children by using clinical and psychological labels, instead we place them in “educational slots.” Interestingly, Juliebo and Elliott (1984) add:

Labeling of course does not only refer to testing deviant behavior. Every time we write a comment on a child’s writing, we are labeling. It does not take a kindergarten child long to realize that the “bluebirds” are brighter than the “canaries.” Often too we only focus on cognitive labeling and affective problems are relegated to the unimportant. (p. 9)

Haynes (1986) reviewed perspectives underlying study skills. Under the motivational perspective, he identified *attribution* as “the assumption is that the tendency to attribute academic success or failure to certain causes can generate feelings of competence or incompetence in students and affect their subsequent performance” (p. 3). He describes *self-esteem* as “the self-perceptions... students hold relative to their ability in certain subject areas [that] influence their approach to studying and their performance in those subject areas” (p. 4). Attribution and self-esteem are affected by verbal and written language. Both are determined by the positive and negative messages one receives from significant others. Haynes (1986) points out:

...many students experience difficulty in school, not because of low intelligence, lack of ability or even lack of effort but because they have made the assessment that they are incapable of performing well. Some-

how, somewhere, from someone they received a negative message about their capability, internalized it, believed it and it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (p. 7)

Holiday (1991), in a brilliant discourse on how William Shakespeare wrote several plays (*The Merchants of Venice, The Tempest, Othello and Titus Andronicus*) that depict Jews and Blacks in a very negative, stereotypical fashion, notes the power of the pen to bring injury to a person or group. He concludes that “words, whether spoken or written, are powerful in their expression” (p. 25). Haynes (1986) points out that the parasympathetic nervous system cannot be ignored because of its centrality in motivating and directing behavior. Likewise, the power of words can not be ignored. Yet Guiley (1999) notes that although we experience the ability of words to harm, we continue to be thoughtless about our choice of words as we go on through life. Words fly off our tongues, and if we regret them, we try to apologize for them, but as Guiley points out that we can never take them back. It should be the goal of all our schools to become intentionally inviting with staffs that practice behaviors, advocate policies, programs, and processes that are intentionally inviting. Certainly the words we verbalize and write must be positive for this goal to be achieved.

The bottom line is that words do have power. They build up people and give them the mind-set that they can do it, but words can tear down people leaving them with the impression that they are nothing and never will be anything. Words can guide or mislead. Words make us knowledgeable or cause us to be left ignorant. Words can create hope or despair. Words can give birth to ideas and challenge people to great heights. Words can empower or enslave. Those of us who have chosen a life as educators must

have a higher consciousness of our words. The school, via its agents (teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and other staff members) must be ever mindful of the power of words. We must use our words to build children, to encourage children, and to empower children. In the words of Allott (2003), "Given the power of words and their functioning in language, and given as the faculty so sharply separating humans from the rest of the animal kingdom, a new understanding of words and language must have great relevance in assessing the human race's past, present and future" (p. 9).

"Resiliency" is the characteristic of children who, though exposed to significant stress and adversity in their lives, do not succumb to school failure, mental health problems, and other debilitating conditions which have been predicted for them by certain words particular words as at-risk, special needs, low-income, etc. (Linquanti, 1992). The presence of protective factors in home, school and community environments appears to alter or reverse predicted negative outcomes and fosters positive development,

over time, of resiliency. Bernard (1991) identifies the following key protective factors found in schools and other environments:

- A caring and supportive relationship with at least one person.
- Consistently clear, high expectations communicated to the child.
- Ample opportunities to participate in and contribute meaningfully to one's societal environment.

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The changed thinking of educators needs to include the enhancement of competence in their children and their tailoring, in part, of a protective shield to help children, especially minority and low-income children, withstand the multiple vicissitudes that they can expect of a stressful world (Garmezy, 1991).

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