

“ Oh No, You Didn't Say That! ”

by Michael Dorer, PhD

The words we use can have profound effects on children. In this article, Dr. Michael Dorer explores some common mistakes we make when talking with children and ways to correct and improve our language to foster respect, self-esteem, and independence.

Picture yourself in this situation. You notice a child wandering around the Montessori classroom. It seems that she has been on the move for quite a while, without finding any constructive work. You decide that it is time to intervene.

When you approach her, which of following do you say?

Would you like to do some work?

What work do you want to do?

You need to do some work.

I need you to do some work.

Do some work for me.

Can you do me a favor? Please do some work.

Have you chosen which to say?

The answer is actually none of the above. Every one of these commonly used phrases should be avoided in the Montessori classroom—as well as in homeschool or family situations. Let's see why.

Would you like to do some work?

There is a Montessori tenet that says, "Never ask a child a question for which you do not want to hear the answer." This is one of those difficult questions. If she answers "No," then you, as the guide, are left uncom-

fortably hanging. It doesn't seem right to say, "All right then, skip work," but neither is it right to say something like, "That is the wrong answer. You have to do some work."

The best solution is to always avoid this kind of question. Instead, try offering the child a choice of two possible activities—not as a question but as a statement. Try saying, "I would like to work with you. Let's pick either the Pink Tower or the Sandpaper Letters." The important thing is to offer two things that are substantially different from each other and which can both be done by the child successfully. Offering the choice as a statement instead of a question avoids the deadly "No!" Once she is engaged with the work, you can move on to other children.

What work do you want to do?

The plain fact is that if the child is wandering about the room and simply looking at the shelves, he probably does not know what he wants to do. Asking him to choose something by saying, "What work do you want to do?" or "Please choose some work" will either result in an entirely random choice—some activity that's simply within the child's visual range—or an answer like, "Nothing." Again, not very helpful responses.

As before, the solution is to sidestep the question entirely: offer the child a choice. Suggest a selection of two activities to which the child has been introduced. "Let's choose either the Color Tablets or Metal Polishing."

Once you offer a choice and the child selects material, accompany the child around the room as he moves the work from shelf to workspace. Stay with the child until he is engaged and then, politely excuse yourself: your role is done.

You need to do some work.

Saying, "You need to do some work," is not only authoritarian but offers a false diagnosis. It is directive, declaring to the child what he needs, unequivocally. It suggests that the adult sees the needs of the child and can diagnose the solution.

It is important in a Montessori classroom, possibly in every classroom, that the adults work to avoid presenting themselves as "know-it-alls." We are just as human as the children, and the children need to see this. When we claim to know the child's need, we set ourselves up to be viewed as arrogant self-proclaimed experts—not a desirable position.

Instead, try saying, "Let's do the Stamp Game!" You may suggest any activity that



Art is an important area not only for self-expression but also for self-esteem. Judgmental statements or questions about what it is have the potential to be really harmful.

you think will best meet what you see as the needs of the child at that time. And again, stay with the child as she accesses the material from the shelf and until she begins to work with it.

I need you to do some work.

This statement changes the classroom paradigm by making the work or choice about you instead of being about the children. It suggests that your personal needs essentially trump the needs and wants of the child; it is the opposite of our true message.

I often hear this type of statement at clean-up time: "I need you to clean up that spill" or "I need you to put your work away."

Become aware of your own language. This phrase, "I need you to..." is so common that it can be unconsciously absorbed. Pay attention and stay alert to your own subconscious tendencies.

Instead, try a request: "Please roll up that rug and put it away." It's okay to be straightforward and, by doing so, we keep things focused on the child's responsibilities, avoiding inherently false questions or inappropriate statements of our adult needs.

Do some work for me.

This is another statement that places adult needs or wishes above the needs of the child, suggesting that the children's occupations should be chosen for the adult instead of the child's own need. Really think about this: why should the children be working for the adult? I would suggest that this kind of statement is not only inappropriate but actually dangerous, in that it suggests that the children's work is not actually for them, but is for the adult.

Instead of, "Please put those paints away for me," simply try, "Please put those paints away." This is clear, direct, and doesn't reference the adult.

Can you do me a favor? Please do some work.

Like the previous two examples, this implies that the child is working for the adult instead of for herself, but this makes an additional egregious mistake of suggesting that work can be done as a special favor to garner adult approval.

As always, be direct, simply asking the child to do the specific work that you feel would be appropriate: "Now, please do these addition problems." The only exception to this is when you are actually asking a child for a real favor, which can't be a command, as favors are

always requests. "Can you do me a favor? Can you help me move these books?" An important thing to remember is that favors are freely given, true choices of the child. So you can ask for one, but you cannot require it. Ask, and be prepared to accept the possibility that your request may be declined.

One More Thing: What is it?

The six statements at the heart of this piece all address wandering or distracted children. But there is one more extremely common phrase to avoid using with children, and it has to do with our response to their artwork. When a child presents us with her latest drawing or sculpture, asking, "What is it?" not only suggests that her artwork is unrecognizable but implies that 'good' art needs to be representational. Asking them to tell us what it is often sends the child back to the drawing board for a redo in her attempt to win our adult approval.

Art is an important area not only for self-expression but also for self-esteem. Judgmental statements or questions about what it is have the potential to be really harmful.

Instead, try non-judgmental statements like, "You used a lot of colors," "I can tell that you really are proud," or "Tell me about your picture." You can also give a noncommittal

"Hmm!"—if delivered with a smile and a nod of the head, this often suffices.

Every day, we speak with the children in our classroom, but it's too common that we slip into unwanted habits of speech that might be hurtful, disrespectful, or thoughtless. It helps to be alert to these usages and self-monitor as best you can.

And remember that it is not only the words that we say, but how we say them. Adult tones should be low and pleasing. Approach children at about an arm's length when you are about to speak with them to avoid the discord of raising your voice and calling across the room.

It helps, especially with young children, to lower your body at the knees when speaking with them. Instead of standing above them or bending from the waist and "talking down" to them, approach them face to face to establish a position of equality with them.

Have this discussion with your colleagues and see what other phrases or questions you can add to improve your vocabulary and avoid damaging statements and questions. Think about common incidents and situations that might elicit raised voices. Ask adult partners to help you by spotting the opportunities to better phrase your interactions with children, and give each other positive feedback when you see successful phrasing statements and requests of children.

Being careful in your speech will reduce the times you cringe and say, "Oh no, I did not just say that! Instead you can be pleased because, "That's how to say it." ■

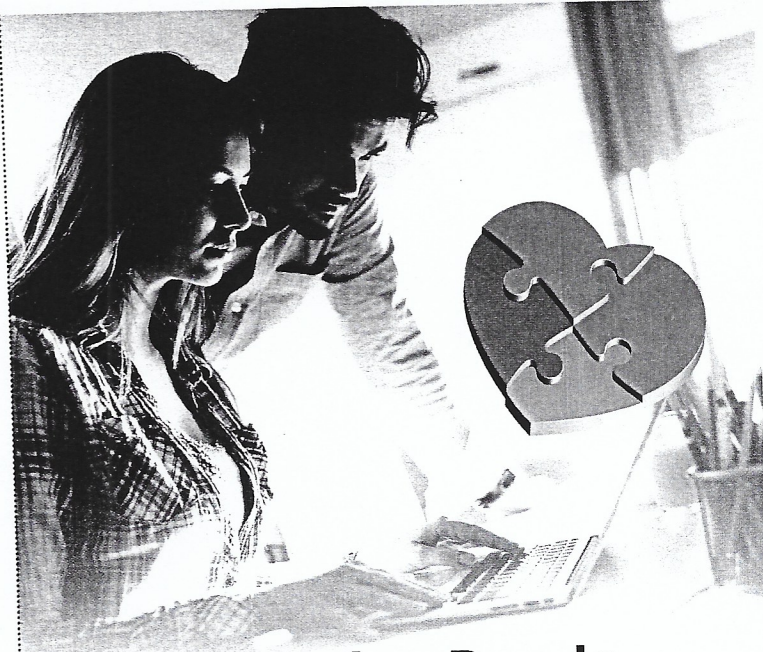


Michael Dorer is a Montessori educator, with a doctorate in Instructional Leadership, and Montessori credentials from AMI and AMS for 3-6 and 6-12.

He has worked in Montessori education since 1969 with Toddlers, Children's House, Elementary, Adolescents, and adults in Montessori teacher training. He is a frequent speaker, presenter, storyteller, and school consultant.

Michael has written seven Montessori curriculum manuals, and many articles. His newest book is *The Deep Well of Time: The Transformative Power of Storytelling in the Classroom*, published by Parent-Child Press.

Michael is the retired Director of Montessori at St. Catherine University and founded the Montessori Institute at Westminster College in Utah.



The Parenting Puzzle

A new online parenting course with Lorna McGrath

View a preview video at: <http://tinyurl.com/parent-puzzle>

Lorna McGrath and The Montessori Foundation are excited about the production of an online parenting course designed to answer the question, "How do Montessori teachers keep all those kids focused, out of squabbles, respectful, AND stay cool, calm, and collected all at the same time when I can't even do it with my own two children?" *The Parenting Puzzle* will give you the tools to turn your homes from battlefields to peaceful havens.

This is the course that parents of toddlers to teens have been waiting for to reduce power struggles and fights, to get children to do their chores, to eliminate rewards and punishments, and much more! Session titles are: *Seeing the World from Three-Foot Tall*; *Why Do They Do What They Do?*; *What Do I Do When I Want to Trade Them for a Different Model?*; *If We Can't Punish or Reward, then What?*; and *Parenting on the Same Page*.

The Parenting Puzzle is a course that can be taken at home by yourself or, better yet, with your parenting partner(s) at a time that makes sense for your family, or it can be offered through your Montessori school with a live facilitator and a group of parents. There are five consecutive, 90-minute sessions that include time for conversations about the ideas and strategies that are being presented and, of course, snacks.

The Parenting Puzzle is just the beginning! After it is launched and you've had a chance to complete the course, we plan to produce four more courses that are age specific. They will help you create a physical environment that supports your child's growth and development, while also adjusting communication and interactions as needed for different ages. Here are course titles: *Right from the Start: Pregnancy through the Toddler Years*; *A New Level of Independence: 3-6 Years Old*; *The Awesome Years: 6-12 Years Old*; and *Here We Go!: 12-18 Years Old*.

Go to montessori.org to learn more or register. For questions email Lorna at: lornamcgrath@montessori.org.