

Communicating With Kids (and adults!)

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For those of us who have watched kids interacting for any amount of time, we know that it can sometimes lead to them saying things like, “I don’t like you” or “I don’t want to play with you anymore” or “You’re mean!” If kids are smart enough to think of these responses, they can be coached on more appropriate responses.

Many of us have heard of the “I-statement” technique. Usually this communication skill is applied to adults to help them better communicate their emotions and not blame others. This technique uses a specific sentence format as follows: “I feel (emotion), when you (action).” For example: “I feel hurt when you ignore me” vs. “You are such a jerk when you ignore me!” As seen by the previous statements, this technique helps the speaker take responsibility for their emotion, while communicating it appropriately to others.

When used with children, the “I-statement” approach can help kids learn to pair words with emotions—a very important skill they will use throughout their life. In the beginning, it may seem unnatural for both adults and children to use “I-statements” in a conversation. However, kids can really do a great job using this technique if they feel confident using it (and have a good example to follow!)

Consider the following situation. Two children are playing, and Sammy takes away Johnny’s toy. Johnny responds by yelling, “I don’t like you anymore!” This is a normal response from a child, because they may not know how to label their feeling - they just know the feeling that when someone takes their toy they don’t want to play with them any more. At this point in the interaction, a parent or caregiver can step in calmly (before it escalates) and ask the child how they feel about having their toy taken away. The adult can prompt the child with a few emotions (mad, sad, etc.) Then, the child can be coached in this way: “When Sammy takes your toy away you feel mad, but you still like him. You can say, ‘Sammy, I feel mad when you take my toy away’.” Maybe Sammy needs to reply with his own I-statement: “Johnny, I felt sad when you said you didn’t like me!” It may seem a little hokey, but don’t underestimate children’s ability to use this! This is a great way for kids to learn how to apologize and resolve their problems.

To help remind you (and the child) to use “I-statements”, post the basic sentence format where you will most often see and use it. Childcare workers or teachers can also use this technique and post it in their classroom. When children start arguing, the parent/caregiver/teacher can point to the sign to remind them of the technique. It may take several sessions of coaching, but they will soon know what to do.

In addition, you can use this technique when speaking with your own children. “Daddy felt sad when you called him a meanie”. This allows the child to understand that mom and dad have feelings, too, while labeling the feeling at the same time. It also provides

an opening for discussion about the topic (i.e. calling people names).

The “I-statement” technique is a helpful tool to increase communication and understanding of one’s emotions. It helps children learn about different emotions and the effect feelings have on themselves and on others. This technique can be used with any age group, from about age 4 and up. It works in just about any situation - even with coworkers or your spouse. Use the “I-statement” technique today with someone and see how it works for you!

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