How To: Use Language Strategies to Promote Engagement in Pre-K and Primary Grades

Below are a sampling of ideas to help children in pre-K and primary grades to be more compliant and engaged in instruction. (NOTE: These are excellent strategies for use by paraprofessionals as well as teachers.)

Promote language development through child-directed speech (Wong, Moran & Foster-Cohen, 2012). When adults prompt young children to use language, they can employ several techniques to increase these students' ability to stay on topic and remain engaged in the conversation:

- *Expansion.* The adult repeats the child's response and adds additional information. Example: When the child states about a book character that "*the dog was hungry*", the adult turns this into an expansion by saying, "*Yes, the dog was hungry because he had not had breakfast.*"

- *Expansion plus question.* The adult expands the child's response and adds a 'wh-' question. Example: When the child states about a book character that "*the dog was hungry*", the adult follows with an expansion plus question: "*Yes, the dog was hungry because he had not had breakfast. **Why** did he miss breakfast?*"

- *Expansion plus cloze.* The adult expands the child's response. The adult then adds a partial statement that is to be completed by the child. Example: When the child states about a book character that "the dog was hungry", the adult follows with an expansion plus cloze: "*Yes, the dog was hungry because he had not had breakfast. He missed breakfast because ____*".

Increase compliance through simple directives and low response effort (Barry, 2006; Wilder et al., 2013). Instructors can increase the likelihood of a young child complying with a directive through two strategies. First, the adult should reduce the response effort of the task to the minimum necessary. For example, if students need to put away books after an activity, the book shelf should be as close to the activity as possible. Second, directives should be simple and specific. Instead of giving a vague directive like "*clean up the play area*", for instance, the educator may direct the student to "*put away your blocks*" and wait for completion of that task before telling her to "*pick up the puzzle pieces*".

Use implicit priming to shape children's behavior (Kesek, Cunningham, Packer, & Zelazo, 2011). Implicit priming is an indirect means of shaping student behaviors that does not require conscious awareness to be effective. One application of this principle is for the teacher to select a desired student behavior to target (e.g., helping behaviors toward others). The teacher then selects or writes a story containing vocabulary and character actions that reinforce this target behavior. While reading, the teacher's comments and dialog with students about the story reinforce the implicit message. For example, to emphasize helping behaviors, the teacher might write or choose a story about a animal character who helps a neighbor. While reading the story aloud, the teacher stresses words and phrases signifying regard for others, such as "gave", "ran an errand for", "thought about", etc. When discussing the story, the teacher employs similar language to reinforce the selected theme--and repeats and draws attention to any student responses that describe or imply helping. At the conclusion of this implicit priming story, the teacher may want to transition students to an activity that allows them to display the desired behavior--for example, pairing children off in a cooperative learning task just after they are primed for helping behaviors.

Train 'precursors' to instructional engagement (Beaulieu, Hanley, & Roberson, 2012). Teachers train children to stop what they are doing and attend to adult signals as a 'precursor' to a rapid transition to the next classroom activity. When the adult calls the child's name or says "everyone", the child is taught to:

- stop the current activity

- look at the adult

- say 'yes'

- wait for the adult's direction.

The adult follows up with labeled praise (specific description of the student's behavior paired with praise) for compliance.

References

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