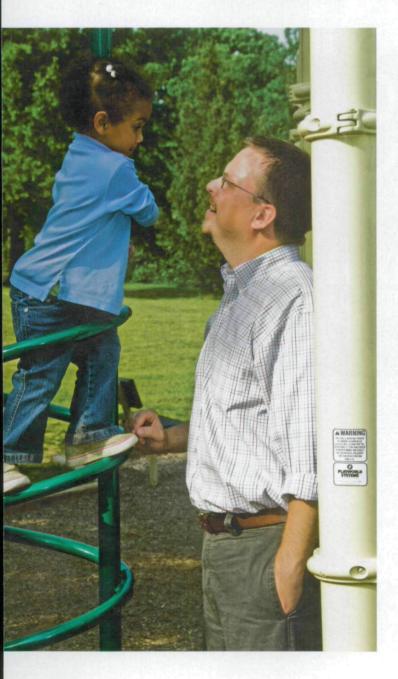# Learn to Say Yes! When You Want to Say No!

to Create Cooperation Instead of Resistance

Positive Behavior Strategies in Teaching

Katharine C. Kersey and
Marie L. Masterson

It is human nature to be resistant when someone tells us no. Children are no exception. Nevertheless, when teachers are frustrated with children's behavior, they may resort to saying no (Lane et al. 2007). Often the child responds, "Why?" or resists.

What teachers really seek are strategies to help children in preschool and the early primary grades learn how to be respectful and cooperative. They want to encourage children to trust their guidance, take their lead, and willingly follow directions.

Katharine C. Kersey, EdD, Director Emerita of the Child Study Center, Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia, is professor of early childhood and previously chaired the university's Department of Early Childhood, Speech Pathology, and Special Education. Kersey is a child behavior expert, teacher and parent educator, author, and speaker. A new edition of her book *The 101s: A Guide to Positive Discipline for Young Children* is forthcoming this fall/winter from Pearson. kkersey@odu.edu

Marie L. Masterson, PhD, is assistant professor of early childhood education at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. She is a Fulbright specialist, former early childhood specialist for the Virginia Department of Education, coordinator of ODU's Director's Institute, author, speaker, behavioral researcher, and educational consultant. mmasterson@dom.edu

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Reframing the equation to understand the power of *yes*

If the goal is to create cooperation and reduce resistance, it helps to replace *no* with strategies that redirect behavior successfully. Effective strategies can turn resistance into cooperation even for children with whom the teacher typically struggles. Saying yes often empowers success and weakens the setup for resistance. Situations that make us want to say no can become opportunities to say yes.

Children's interactions with teachers (negative or positive) provide a lasting blueprint for the way children feel about learning and themselves, teachers, and their peers, now and in the future (Miles & Stipek 2006; Cozolino 2007). Positive interactions are the hallmark of high-quality educational environments and provide an essential framework for motivation, learning, and development (NICHD-ECCRN 2005; Fantuzzo et al. 2007; Haynes 2008). Outcomes of responsive practices include increased social skills, greater emotional regulation, and ongoing motivation for children (Emmer & Stough 2001). In addition, positive relationships support resiliency, compensate for stress experienced at home, and help children achieve their full potential (Hamre & Pianta 2005; Raver et al. 2008).

Even though research advocating the benefits of positive interactions in early childhood (birth to age 8) is compelling, teachers may need fresh approaches to create this kind of climate and help children find healthy solutions to challenges. In an engaging, supportive classroom environment, teachers can develop strategies that encourage respectful, effective communication and ensure children's success (Miller & Sawka-Miller 2007).

Four strategies for replacing *no* with *yes*

The following four strategies encourage behavioral changes in ways that support children and teachers.

1. The **make-a-big-deal** strategy

List all the positive qualities you hope children will develop. When you see children demonstrating those qualities, say,

"I saw you sharing! That was so thoughtful."

"I saw you helping your friend."

"I heard the two of you discussing the rules of the new board game. What did you decide?"

"I noticed the story you were writing. Can you tell me about it?"

When you give attention, thanks, specific and effective praise, and recognition for a job well done, children feel

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proud of their contributions and know their responsibility is valued. This draws their attention to important traits that will serve them well now and throughout life. The behaviors you focus on will grow!

In *My Stroke of Insight*, Jill Bolte Taylor (2008) says that human brains are designed to focus on anything we are looking for. If we seek red in the world, then we will find it everywhere. The longer we concentrate on it, the more we see it. Shifting our attention to behaviors we want to see more often is as important for adults as it is for children (Miller & Sawka-Miller 2007). When we look for the positive in the classroom, our eyes and ears become trained to find, emphasize, and reinforce the respectful behaviors children need to possess.

Choose a child who is less likely to be on task or who tends to require a great deal of support. Take every opportunity to make a big deal about this child's positive contributions:

"I'm amazed you remembered all of the chapter we read yesterday."

"You can really figure out things so quickly."

"I saw how kind you were to Jules when she bumped into your lunch tray."

"You worked so hard to get the blocks picked up. That was a good solution to sort first and then carry them over to the shelf."

This child will soon feel connected to you in positive ways. He will likely be less resistant and more cooperative. He will learn to use the actions and behaviors that lead to satisfying results.

It takes practice to notice children when they are behaving appropriately. Speaking positively yields a huge payoff. The truth is, what we respond to positively will grow. Like a plant that is fed and watered, the behavior that gets our positive attention will thrive.

2. The **incompatible alternative** strategy

When trying to stop an undesired behavior, it's necessary to replace it with something else. Give a child something appropriate to do that ends the inappropriate behavior. For example, if a child is running around the room, ask her to pass out books. You will discover quickly how easily this encourages cooperation. Instead of saying no (or "Don't do

that"), tell the child what *to do*. When a child is distracting a friend and keeping him from writing in his journal, you can say, "Please show me how your writing or picture is progressing."

Redirecting behavior with incompatible alternatives is highly effective (Tiger, Hanley, & Hernandez 2006). Instead of expending energy emphasizing what is not working, think about a desired behavior. For example, rather than ask a child to stop running, suggest something positive, such as "Use your walking feet" or "Come tiptoe behind me." Teachers will be surprised how quickly the child responds to the new suggestion (Masterson 2008).

3. The **choice** strategy

Choice gives a child alternatives. The teacher states a desired goal and then gives the child two choices for accomplishing it; both are positive and acceptable.

"We need to be quiet in the hall. Would you rather tiptoe or sneak along like a mouse?"

"It's time to go back inside. Would you rather help carry the bag of balls or the hula hoops?"

The strategy behind choice teaches children that there are different ways to accomplish a goal. Using two positive choices increases cooperation and helps children become creative and thoughtful (Kersey 2006; Masterson 2008).

"It's time to clear off our desks. Do you want to do it in one minute or two? I will set the timer."

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If the child suggests a third alternative, the teacher needs to remain firm.

"One minute or two? You choose or I'll choose."

Adding "You choose or I'll choose" softens even the most resistant child, because he will want to decide for himself.

"It's chilly outside. Will you wear your coat or your sweater?"

If you offer a specific choice and the child hesitates, then choose one while quickly making cheerful conversation about what is going to happen next. It is important to move on. Practicing making choices with a teacher gets children in the habit of looking for positive alternatives when they can't have what they originally wanted.

4. The when/then strategy

"When you put your books on the shelf, then you may put on your coat."

"When you finish putting away the playdough, then you may choose a partner for the game."

Using the principle of *when/then* is a strategy that links a specific expectation to a positive outcome. When/then uses a logical contingency and communicates expectations (Kersey 2006). It is important to say "when" rather than "if." The word *if* may cause a child to think or respond, "Suppose I don't?" But the word *when* communicates your trust that the child will follow through.

"When you clean up, then you may have lunch."

"When you come, then we'll choose a book to read together."

"When your table is clear, then you may go to the library."

Children handle transitions more easily when they understand expectations. Saying "if" invites a power struggle. Saying "when" invites cooperation.

Until the child completes the first responsibility, of course, she loses out on the promised outcome, such as a new activity. "When you put away your markers, then you may go to the sand table." If she doesn't put away the markers, she can't go on to the next center. We want to say and communicate to children what we ourselves would want to hear—respectful, positive words about what needs to be done. The when/then principle communicates respect and gives children a consistent opportunity to be successful.

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Ensuring positive outcomes

Teachers may use the four strategies for positive redirection alone, in succession, or combined as needed to invite children's cooperation and responsibility.

"You and Tabitha used great teamwork to read sooner!" (make-a-big-deal strategy)

"Can you arrange the blocks in order by size?" (incompatible alternative strategy)

"Would you like her help, or can you do it yourself?" (choice strategy)

"When you have put away the tray of sorting blocks, then you may sit with Tabitha." (when/then strategy)

These four strategies help teachers and children to shift direction, refocus attention, and say yes when they might otherwise say no.

Creating a *yes* environment provides an excellent setting for children's exploration and mastery (Anderson 2009). Focusing on what we want, instead of putting our energies into what we don't want, results in higher cooperation and more time spent on learning. We want to say yes as often as we can, knowing that we are teaching children skills that will serve them well in school and in life.

Get Started Using the Four Strategies

- Begin with one new strategy.
- Use the strategy until you feel comfortable. Add the others one at a time.
- Record your reflections in a journal: What happened or led up to the interaction? Which strategy did you use? How did the situation turn out? How did the child respond? What did you learn?
- Practice until the strategies become second nature. The strategies model skills that help children to become responsive and cooperative.

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