

A LINE ON LIFE

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Speak Softly to Preschoolers *

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"A mother watches as a neighbor's child darts across a busy street; she then sees her own child about to imitate this act. The mother shouts, 'Don't cross the street!'"



Rather than stopping the behavior, the shouted command leads the child to cross the street at a faster rate. Even if the child is not injured, the mother is very confused. Rather than encouraging compliance, the shouted command increases the disobedience. For those who deal with 2- to 4-year-old children, this is a common experience. What is happening?

Some say that the child is *testing the limits*. In contrast to this explanation, another possibility exists. When children this age receive shouted negative instructions, they may not be interpreting the instructions the way an adult would.

In the 1960s, a soviet psychologist, A. R. Luria, studied the language processing abilities of children under 5. He found that shouted negative instructions had the opposite effect of what was intended. He believed that preschoolers understand instructions differently. Luria concluded that it is more effective to command preschoolers in a *soft voice* to get them to stop an

undesired action. In contrast, in a serious situation, most adults think the best way to get the child to notice and obey is to SHOUT.

With shouted commands like, "*Don't cross the street!*" or "*Don't pull the dog's tail!*", Luria detected two problems. First, the louder the volume of the command, the less likely it is to be obeyed. The second problem involves a command that contains two opposing ideas. The first is the negative aspect – "*Don't.*" The second indicates the undesired behavior – "*Cross the street*" or "*Pull the dog's tail.*"

Both Russian and American researchers have found that the ability of children to restrict their actions by responding to verbal commands develops over a long time. Early on, children have problems separating the meaning of the command from the context of the situation. Sometimes the context confuses the children.

Researchers found that preschoolers respond to shouting very much like athletes respond to a cheering crowd. If they receive exciting visual or auditory stimuli – like a panicked parent shouting when they are doing something – these stimuli will lead the child to act more vigorously rather than stopping. The **loudness** of the voice is interpreted similarly to the roar of the crowd for athletes. The meaning is lost, and the child responds to the volume as if the parent is shouting, "*Go, go, go!*"

Second, the information may be too complex for preschoolers to process. "*Don't go into the street!*" may be interpreted as "*Go into the street!*" Preschoolers may not understand that "*don't*" negates the remainder of the statement. If this confusion exists, then merely saying "*Stop!*" would be more effective. Several experiments have been conducted to support Luria's conclusions. In a 1983 study, 3-4 year olds were compared to 5-6 year olds in playing a game similar to *Simon Says*. Children were told that the game was to see how well they could follow instructions. They were given 15 positive commands ("*Clap your hands.*")

and 15 negative commands ("*Don't touch your toes.*"). With both types of commands, the experimenter modeled the behavior. Even with the negative commands, the behavior was modeled. In other words, even if the command was "*Don't touch your toes,*" the model touched her toes. While giving the commands, voice volume was randomly varied from loud to moderate to soft.

With the soft-spoken and moderate level commands, both age levels responded with about the same level of correctness. In contrast, with shouted commands, there were no errors among the 5-6 year olds. In other words, the 5-6 year olds recognized that "*don't*" was a negation of the rest of the command, even if the experimenter was modeling the undesired behavior. For them, shouting merely gained their attention.

The 4-5 year olds behaved quite differently to shouting. In other words, they made *more* errors when the command was shouted than when it was spoken more softly. This supports Luria's explanation – the loudness of the command, even though it was telling them not to do something, stimulated the unwanted response. The 4-5 year olds are responding more to the command *volume* rather than the actual meaning of the words.

Thus, if your preschooler is doing some undesirable or dangerous activity, it is more effective to speak softly to the child. If you are so emotionally involved that you can't keep from yelling, rather than giving the whole command, just shout, "***STOP!***"

* Adapted from John P. Dworketsky's *Introduction to Child Development*, West Publishers, 1987, pages 277-278.