

The Power of Brevity: Two-Word Cues

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Cooper and I were in class together: dog behavior class! When my little cairn terrier (a Toto dog, but wheat colored) was about six months old, I decided that I needed help knowing how to train him to have good manners. So, each week for six weeks, we traveled way out into the Ohio farmlands to a dog trainer who had come highly recommended. Cooper absolutely loved it because he received treats for every little thing he accomplished. The classes made him highly hyper-active, and they made me exhausted.

As the two of us progressed through the several “dog exercises,” I couldn’t help but compare our training to classroom management. I may have wanted to say, “Cooper, please stop licking that stuff on the floor. It makes me gag to see you do that, and you should instead be healing at my ankle. We want to do well in this class and show our teacher how well we learn.” Of course, if I said this, I would be saying it *for* and *to* myself! For Cooper, all he needed to hear was, “Stop licking!” or just “No.”

In classrooms, we could all do well to remember that many of our words are unnecessary. And, not only are they not needed, sometimes they deflect attention from what we really want to convey. Haven’t we all had the experience that someone is using so many words to tell us something that we lose the incentive, the discipline, or the interest in listening? What if that someone is us??

“Voices ready.” What a concise, direct, and specific cue! “Eyes here, Sitting tall, Lips closed, Hands quiet, Ears ready, Breath energy, No sound, Sticks down, Not now.” No matter the age, these kinds of cues are clear and brief. Even if repetition of the two-word directive is needed, in my classes, the brevity still feels efficient: “No sound. No sound. Marcus, no sound.”

When your students are accustomed to hearing you give brief instructions, a one word direction can work just as well: “Ears..., Eyes..., Hands..., Tall..., Breath...” Of course, with this economy of language, we could acknowledge the bi-products: fewer words mean

- more rest for our voices during a busy teaching day,
- more focus on the music rather than our voices,
- more moments of attentive silence during our classes,
- more assistance for those children struggling with English as a second language or language processing disorders.

Sometimes, our two-word cues are assertive and commanding in order to get children’s attention. The intonation and inflection we use with these two-word or one-word directives, however, need not be commanding or scolding: in fact they are sometimes more effective when they are not. Spoken with the intonation of a reminder, a simple statement, or a cordial request, two-word cues can give the message of courteous elicitation. With brevity and intonation, we are able to “scoop up” children’s attention and place it on the sound of music.

During our daily walks, Cooper believes that each tree is a treasure trove of compelling odors. Often times, he has ended up on the other side of the tree, so the leash is wrapped around the tree, and we have a little tug-of-war to see who is willing to give in and walk to the other side. Now, however, at three years old, Cooper understands “This way” means to backtrack and come to the side I am on. Each time he reroutes and comes to my side of the tree, I am amazed: he listens for what to do and he understands the command. And, the same is true now in my classes.

The power of brevity is a simple, yet profound idea that can yield big returns in focusing our students. Try it! Show focus! Watch kids! Have fun!