

DECLARATIVE LANGUAGE: TELLING IT LIKE IT IS!

Declarative language is the language of experience sharing. The language can be verbal or nonverbal. It is creative and dynamic in nature in that you cannot predict exactly what another person will say. Declarative language shares information, experiences and opinions. The goal of declarative communication is to gain another person's perspective, ideas, insights and thoughts. Declarative communication is cumulative in nature. A response to declarative language adds to what the communicative partner already knows, so it cannot be scripted. In contrast, imperative language is a means to an end. The response to imperative language is either right or wrong. Responses to imperative communication can be scripted and predicted. Nonverbal communication, the use of gestures, facial expressions, vocal intonation, is not important in imperative communication. Imperative language involves: questions, directions, commands. It is not dynamic in nature and may not require any further interaction beyond the response to the single sentence input.

A positive communicative environment can be fostered in the following ways:

1. Establish a declarative /imperative language ratio of 80/20. That is, save your commands/ directives for when you really need them!
2. Communicate with the intent to share experiences by making comments about the immediate environment, your feelings, prior related events, or immediately upcoming events.
3. Offer input that invites a response but does not demand it.
4. Give your student time to respond (15 to 35 seconds- which is a very long time) while you remain attentive to him.
5. Offer comments about the senses, i.e., what you see, hear, feel, taste and smell.
6. Pose problems through declarative statements so that the student can assume the responsibility to infer information in order to solve the problem (see below)
7. Offer content that is open ended so there is no right or wrong way to respond.
8. Limit questions to when you do not know the answer. Don't test!
9. When making a declarative utterance, use vocabulary and sentence structures that are not too complicated for your student's language level re both comprehension and expression. That is, if your student cannot understand language that is not about the immediate context, talk about the immediate context.

10. Use facial expressions and gestures to support your comments
11. Use facial expression and gestures alone as declarative statements unto themselves
12. Communicate about what you are doing together
13. Slow down your pace of talking to reflect the pace of the student's ability to process the information
14. Use fewer words
15. Increase the variations in your intonation to attract the student's attention
16. Increase your range and depth of facial expressions and gestures to support the language
17. Allow the communication exchange to break down in simple ways (e.g. you lose your focus) so that the student is given the opportunity to repair (e.g. tap you to get your attention).

Above all else do not demand responses from the student. Your language input should not be used to get specific information out of the student or to get the student to say what you want him to say. Your language input should be a moment in which you share and invite the student to share with you.

Using declarative communication can make a dramatic difference. Declarative communication removes the pressure from the student to provide the correct answer. It also encourages the student to be a thinker and to assume responsibility. Declaratives are invitations to interact and react, while questions are typically cues to provide a right answer.

Types of declarative utterances:

Comments:

I really like playing with cars.
That car is at the top of the hill.
We went to the restaurant for lunch.
That was a really loud noise.
Your music has a great beat.

Declarations:

Today is my birthday.
I am going to try and win
We won!
I want to eat lunch, I am hungry!

Opportunities for Problem solving:

Oh no the table is wet.
I can't open the door.

The walk is slippery.

Predictions:

I bet the books will fall.

There is a lot of noise in this room, I bet John did not hear you.

I think Mrs. S. will really like this cake.

Reflections:

It was fun going to buy ice cream.

He is super fast runner

That was a really tasty apple.

I liked that we read together.

Enthusiasm:

Wow! We did it.

We are the best

You are the bravest.

Ouch! That hurt.

Support:

You can do it.

She is a really good basketball player.

Announcements:

We are going to the restaurant for dinner.

I would like some ice cream.

Perspective sharing:

I don't like magazines.

Going on the rides make me feel sick.

It scares me to be up high.

Declarative questions:

(if you know the answer, then it is not a declarative)

Do you know what I think?

Which one is your favorite?

What do you think about?

Where are my keys? (when you can't find them)

Invitations:

What should we do next?

We could go to CVS next.

I can make mine loud.

Attempts at regulation:

Hey that one is too fast for me.

You forgot about me.
Wait for me.
I want a turn.

Self regulation:
I can do it.
I need to slow down and try again.
If he gives me a turn, I will try it.

Shared narrative:
That was so funny, I wonder what will happen next
It was fun making the cake but everything got so messy.

Self narrative:
When we were playing checkers, I made four kings.

Inferring information:

The child's thinking is based on language, contextual cues and prior experiences/
knowledge.

One of the most didactic uses of declarative language is the use of language to comment on conditions in the environment affording the student an opportunity to infer information. Given time to respond, the student is expected to: recognize the conditions stated, infer what needs to be done and finally, do it. Initially, a student may need extended time to respond to this type of declarative language. As the parent/ teacher, you may have to wait as long as 25 to 45 seconds. You may have to expand the language input to further explain or spotlight the condition (e.g. initial statement: My arms are full. Second statement: I can't open the door.). You may have to add a visual reference to the problem, e.g. looking at the door and then looking at your packages. The key is that you do not tell the student what to do so he has the opportunity to think, to infer information. Typically, this basic inferring of information is seen in children as young as two years of age. On the other hand, special needs students do not infer the information because they are rarely given the opportunity to infer or if they are given the opportunity, they are not given the time to take advantage of the opportunity to think. They have learned that someone else will do the thinking for them!

The simplest level of declarative language for inferring information includes the label of the object needed, e.g. the table is wet/ your coat fell/ there are no cookies. The next level would be mentioning the function, e.g. we need to stir/ I can't cut the paper.

A hierarchy for declarative language programming:
Concrete paired with visual referencing, e.g. the table is wet + visual referencing to the paper towel and back to the table + the object label.
Concrete: you describe the physical component, e.g. Your coat is on the floor, and include the object label.

Concrete: you describe the physical component + include the function needed.
Thinking of an outcome of the result of the physical, e.g. Someone might trip
General statement about not being ready, e.g. You not ready for math
Just waiting for the child to scan the setting

if you start your statement with a verb or a question word, it is not a declarative statement, unless you don't know the answer to the question.

Using declarative language to foster the student's ability to infer information, helps the student in the following ways:

- to assume responsibility in the environment
- initiate responses
- listen to language that is not imperative in nature
- listen to conversational language
- respond to incidental requests
- respond on behalf of someone else
- become a more active participant in life.

Changing your ratio of declarative language/imperative language is not as easy as it sounds. Imperative language is habitual and is well reinforced by responses from the student. You will need to work hard and self monitor. In the end, it will be well worth it!

DON'Ts:

- don't make the student feel that he is doing everything, so make sure that you join in, .e.g I got the brush while the paints are on the table
- don't make it a false need, i.e., don't stand by the door with the student 10 feet away with your hands empty and say, the door is not open, you could and should be the one to open it
- don't offer a declarative language statement with a tag question attached: we're going to play ball, right?
- don't offer a declarative language statement followed by a question because the student did not respond
- don't offer a declarative language statement count to two and then solve the problem for the student.

DOs:

- make it real
- share information about yourself, your feelings, your experiences
- really need the student's help so that the student feels good about himself for helping
- pair exaggerated facial expressions and change in prosody to catch the student's attention (remember they don't hear dl initially)
- understand that a big piece of the declarative language for problem solving is to allow the student to initiate

- understand that the use of imperative language is habitual because you are reinforced by hearing your student's voice or by a response that says that the student understood, so changing to dl language is not easy
- pick one room to start and target that room as your declarative language room
- have lots of patience for yourself as there will be lots of missed opportunities
- have lots of patience for your student as they don't even hear declarative language at this point given the difference in prosody and they are not accustomed to being required to respond: teachers, aides and parents prompt the student very quickly and peers take over for them
- initially, use declarative language in a setting that you know the student would typically respond to anyway, e.g. his pencil falling
- use the following hierarchy to support responding: general Declarative language (e.g. oh a mess) to more specific (that table is dirty) to more specific (it feels sticky as you touch the table) more specific (you are going to need a paper towel to clean this), referencing included, modeling and referencing included

Suggestions as to how to support the use of declarative language by the adult:

- Choose one activity and use declarative language during that one activity. You could write out possible declaratives for that activity before doing the task.
- When you feel comfortable using declarative language during that one activity, add another.
- Use declarative language in one setting. When you feel comfortable using declarative language in that setting, add another setting.
- Support each other and offer alternatives for directives when you hear someone use a directive!
- Have specific moments when you use declarative language, e.g. when pausing before leaving a room, when you are about to open a container for the child
- Whenever the child gives you an object or you are taking an object from the child, hold onto the child's hand and the object and offer a declarative statement before releasing his hand.
- Remember if you start a sentence with a verb, then it is a directive

At the beginning, use concrete declarative language, i.e., a statement that contains the label of the object or the function of the object when presenting a declarative statement from which he is to infer information.

Declarative language encourages experience sharing, the essence of what communication and language use is all about!

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