The Power of Please: How Courtesy Scripts Improve Self-Control and Reduce Peer Conflict by Creating New Language Patterns

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Abstract

This teacher inquiry project describes how one first grade teacher learned to use coached language supports to improve children's self-control and cooperation. *Courtesy scripts* were created in the process. The development of courtesy scripts and their application in early elementary classrooms is presented. Courtesy scripts are specific phrases explicitly taught (I do, we do, you do), reinforced, and used in conversations by both the speaker and listener. Children learned how to make requests while also honoring the needs of others. Use of these pragmatic language supports helped to create a peaceful classroom community. A practical method for teaching courteous language patterns to young children is described by presenting scripts that can be easily adopted or modified by teachers. Scripts for peer requests and for sharing are provided as examples. The courtesy scripts method may be of interest to scholars studying the relationship between language usage and prosocial behavior in early childhood settings. Teacher educators may also be interested in the method when providing professional development related to social, emotional and character development or when teaching classroom management.

Introduction

During my second year of teaching first grade at an urban public school in Virginia, I began observing that children's language usage consistently mirrored their behavior. When children used kind and courteous language with others, gentle and helpful behavior followed. However, much of the language children were using in my classroom carried impatient emotion and was delivered bluntly, igniting reactions. Children were unable to solve peer problems with the language patterns they used and conflict continued or escalated. Children had not previously learned how to express their needs and wants productively or positively. They did not know how to have their voices heard and needs met. If the language that children used with one another

changed, I predicted, so would their behavior. More importantly, courteous language patterns might help children gain control over much more of the school day, build more authentic relationships and be better able to focus on learning, rather than peer concerns. My research question was: How do teachers promote courteous language skills to improve peer relationships, self-control and a peaceful classroom community?

Review of Literature

Guiding children to speak courteously with one another has a long history in early childhood education, given impetus by Dr. Maria Montessori's grace and courtesy lessons conducted in an environment promoting integrated moral development (Sackett, 2015; Cain, 2005; Gregoire, 2017). Montessori observed that in a carefully prepared environment, and by modeling the values and skills that sustain social life and civilization, young children develop "normalization," a combination of traits such as self-control, courtesy and related social skills.

Peter Block (2009) has argued that how adults speak to one another directly relates to the type of community, and sense of belonging, we experience: "Transformation and restoration occur through the power of language, and how we speak and listen to each other. This is the medium through which a more positive future is created or denied" (p. 101). How does the power of language manifest itself in early childhood classrooms? Targeting pragmatic language (as an input) to improve behavior (as an outcome) among children with behavioral challenges is an important topic (Ketelaars et al., 2010; Hartas, 2011). In a study of 1364 four-year-olds, Ketelaars et al. (2010) discovered that pragmatic language problems are strongly correlated with externalizing behavior problems, suggesting that "early assessment of pragmatic competence may benefit early detection of children at risk of behavioural problems" (p. 204). In a study of 5 – 12 year olds from a low-SES background, pragmatic language ability was related to

hyperactivity and peer problems (Law, Rush and McBean, 2014). Furthermore, children with below average vocabulary have significantly more problem behaviors than children with above average vocabularies (Hartas, 2011). Researchers are also investigating the relationship between language ability and children's cooperation in play (Vriens-van Hoogdalem, de Haan and Boom, 2016). A related line of inquiry investigates social-emotional characteristics as inputs with language ability as the measured outcome. For example, a positive emotional climate is associated with improved expressive and receptive language ability (Mashburn et al, 2009).

There is a significant body of literature about relational aggression (social bullying), documenting how hurtful peer language is used to exclude and disrupt children's sense of group and peer belonging and weaken ties of friendship (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995; Smith-Bonahue, Smith-Adcock and Ehrentraut, 2015). Many examples of such language are provided by Smith-Bonahue, Smith-Adcock and Ehrentraut (2015) in a paper about young children's relational aggression, its relationship to social-emotional development, and ways to prevent such behavior. Children's relationally aggressive statements often revolve around withholding their friendship from peers who do not conform to their desires. Solutions provided include 1) teachers holding high expectations for kind and courteous behavior while providing negative consequences for verbal/relational aggression, 2) understanding classroom peer dynamics to identify when and why relational aggression occurs, 3) modeling "respect and affection for everyone in the class" and teaching children prosocial skills to strengthen positive relationships, 4) reframing children's problem behavior in a positive or supportive manner, *including giving children the words they need* to solve their own conflicts, 5) involving children in cooperative, not competitive, games and activities, and 6) implementing a social-emotional curriculum to teach social skills, including the use of "phrases that are helpful in social situations." Using a morning meeting and involving

children in role-playing social skills during circle time are key elements of the SEL curriculum (Smith-Bonahue, Smith-Adcock and Ehrentraut, 2015).

Intervention strategies to meet children's social and emotional needs include the development of language and need to be "contextually relevant" and "situated within the curriculum" (Hartas, 2011). Early childhood teachers' action research to improve social-emotional learning in their classrooms has described many promising strategies, which often relate to language and communication (Dixon, 2016; Ringgenberg, 2016). For example, Philadelphia first grade teacher Holly Dixon (2016) "decided to focus on helping students develop the vocabulary for describing their feelings and the essential skills for exchanging ideas." Dixon guided her children to describe how they feel, and to recognize the feelings in others. She used a "peace corner" to help children speak openly with one another and solve their conflicts. She used the popular activity of building a marshmallow tower as a team building activity to develop "listening skills, positive communication, persistence, encouragement, and reflection…" in a non-competitive format. These and other efforts culminated in students "embracing peace." She concluded that children's ability to solve peer problems independently required "giving my students words to help them describe their feelings" while also implementing a variety of supportive strategies. There are many such supportive strategies, such as speaking with parents to understand children's interests to better engage them in the classroom, teaching positively framed behavioral expectations, modeling empathy to create an "empathetic classroom," validating children's perspectives and feelings and problem solving in groups (Price and Steed, 2016).

Philosophy of Courtesy

What does courtesy look and sound like among a group of young children? If an entire environment is courteous, how would you characterize and describe that environment? Like Montessori, I think it would be peaceful, yet alive and happy. It would be orderly and calm, yet also productive and focused. The general environment would be friendly, with kindness shown in words and deeds. Deep learning would be taking place. Courtesy is a heartfelt language and behavior that says, "I see you. I value you. You are important." In contrast, forceful ways of speaking and behaving are abrupt, disconnected and communicate disinterest in the other as a real person.

Courtesy values the authentic self. How can we share our honest thoughts and emotions socially when we are confronted with environments that tolerate sarcasm, impatience, anger and even aggression in language and behavior? Such social dangers stifle the innate desire to connect meaningfully with others. Courtesy requires daily courage and willful effort, especially if living in a culture suffused with discontent. Baha'u'llah, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, said in 1873 "In truth, the hearts of men are edified though the power of the tongue, even as houses and cities are built up by the hand and other means" (Baha'u'llah, 1992, p. 77). And, "courtesy is, in truth, a raiment which fitteth all men, whether young or old. Well is it with him that adorneth his temple therewith, and woe unto him who is deprived of this great bounty" (Baha'u'llah, 2002, p. 71).

Courtesy is that manner of speaking that edifies the heart and character of others, manifested in dignified and kind behavior. A teacher who lacks courtesy can instruct but is unlikely to "edify the heart" to transform children's character or the classroom climate. Have I taught my students to speak and act courteously with one another? Like learning anything, courtesy needs to be modeled, practiced with feedback and sustained. An important first step is

to learn how to be as kind and loving as possible to the children in our care (Haslip, Allen-Handy & Donaldson, 2019).

Methods

I taught first grade in a Title I public school in a mixed-urban city in Virginia in 2011-12, when this study was conducted. I was also completing a Ph.D. program at the time. The 20 children in my class came from predominately low-income families. Ten were male, 10 were female. Sixteen were African America, 2 were Hispanic and 2 were White. Six were reading below grade level and one had special education needs. None were receiving speech therapy services or spoke English as a second language.

My study was conducted using teacher action research to improve children's courteous language in the classroom. The study spanned much of the academic year because of the iterative nature of observing, intervening with lessons based on observed needs, watching the results of these lessons in daily behavior, and making further adjustments to the intervention as needed. I collected data by listening to how children spoke about their needs and wants and documenting these "baseline" statements anecdotally. I noted the frequency of negative statements made by children to one another. Although I did not have time to count and tally every example of negative speech in the classroom throughout the day, I did categorize days according to what I perceived to be "high," "moderate," or "low" rates of negative speech behaviors. At the beginning of the year, nearly every day was classified as being a "highly negative" day for verbal interactions.

Cumulative observations, and my reflective analysis of verbal negativity, allowed me to diagnose the specific problem: children did not have a common framework of courteous words or phrases to use when they needed to make requests. Instead, children used a range of

statements such as: "Give me that!" "Stop messing with me!?" "Fine, you can have it!" "Move over!" In the absence of specific language to communicate their needs and requests, many children used emotion to communicate by becoming angry, reactive or defensive. Some learned to be very quiet. Some learned to ask me repeatedly to intervene.

At this point, I was ready to introduce the first version of a courtesy intervention which was simply to teach the students during daily morning meetings to start their peer requests with the words, "will you please," as in, "*will you please* give me the pencil…scoot over…leave me alone…". I perceived that starting all requests with *will you please* would take some of the emotion out of the statements and make it easier for the listener to hear the request and reply positively. I added a "will you please" practice to our daily morning meeting routine. When the time came, I would say, "lets practice our will-you-pleases" and I would lead the class in a call and response with common pragmatic requests. I would say "will you please not step on my shoe," and the class would repeat the statement. I selected these examples based on recent observed classroom behaviors that had created conflict (e.g. as a child was waiting in line to leave the classroom for lunch, he stepped on someone's foot in line and provoked an angry response). Next, children in pairs would make up some will-you-pleases, and role-play these statements using the turn and talk procedure. We did this each morning and I observed behavior throughout the day. Interactions improved somewhat, but then I observed that will-you-please statements were easily ignored by the listeners. I had not taught the children how to listen and *reply* to a will-you-please request. Also, children sometimes would angrily yell, "WILL YOU PLEASE!" Peer conflict continued in both cases.

How should a listening child respond to a will-you-please request? After reflecting on myriad social interactions and corresponding reasons for peer requests, I identified two

categories: peers made requests of one another to 1) **start a peer behavior** ("will you please share the eraser….scoot over, etc") or 2) **stop a behavior** ("will you please not take my book"). Regarding the latter category, peer conflicts often had to do with righting a perceived wrong. How should a listener respond based on the type of peer request spoken to them? In a future morning meeting, we discussed how the listener needs to reply if they hear the words "will you please." Listeners could say "okay" or "sorry." Saying sorry was voluntary because coerced apologies are not sincere. During the following morning meetings children used the turn and talk procedure to practice making will-you-please statements, and now the listener had to reply to each statement with "okay" or "sorry." Then, they switched roles. The reply of "okay" or "sorry" seemed to cover all the please requests intended to start a peer behavior or stop a peer behavior. I listened to peer language and corresponding behavior again throughout the day, carefully observing how children spoke with each other about their needs and requests. We discussed that if a child said "okay," they had to follow through on starting or stopping the behavior requested.

A new situation emerged. If a child was accused of doing something they did not do, how should they respond? We added to the response list the phrase "that wasn't me." Instead of becoming defensive and upset, a student could just say "that wasn't me" if they were unfairly accused of doing something they really did not do. By now we had a simple *script* to practice each morning, and use all day. Could *all* peer requests really be addressed courteously using a please prompt followed by "okay, sorry or that wasn't me" as a reply? By this point, children were sincerely making please requests, but when listening they would sometimes angrily yell "okay!" or "that wasn't me!" I modeled using the phrases in the script without emotional affect, and children practiced the phrases in a neutral tone of voice. Again, I observed behavior. When children yelled, "okay!" in the middle of an activity, I asked them to repeat the reply in a calm

voice. Prompting and reinforcing the use of these phrases throughout the day was essential to help children establish new language-plus-behavior habits.

When children began to tattle, I asked, "did you use your will-you-pleases first?" A child could come to me if the listener did not reply with one of the 3 possible responses on the script. A new tattling procedure emerged: children could only tattle after they had tried a will-you-please statement without receiving a positive reply. When a child tattled, I brought the two children together and facilitated their dual use of the script, just as we practiced it each day during the morning meeting. Once children experienced that tattling simply resulted in going through the same script they could otherwise complete on their own (but in a more public manner), tattling behavior was virtually extinguished as the script was universally adopted. Throughout all this time, I also made sure to start all my teacher requests with please statements.

Findings

I learned that telling children to "use your words" without explicitly giving them the words to use does not improve their self-control and cooperation because many children come to school without a framework of courteous phrases to draw upon in the first place. I needed to create a language framework with children to facilitate their independent interactions. Giving the speaker courteous words to use without giving the *listener* explicit words for a productive response also does not work. What is needed are not just "phrases" but an actual *script*, exact words for both speaker and listener to use, just as actors initially learn their character using the script before adlibbing later. Likewise, children can speak extemporaneously (without using provided language) once the virtue of courtesy has been internalized after considerable practice with a script.

There are many ways to speak kindly around the world according to custom, culture and context, but young children (who are all in the same class and need to speak with each other across cultures for many hours each day) often need a template, a starting point. The goal is not conformity in language usage, but providing a common foundation from which multiple expressions of courtesy can flower. What started with a desire to see children treat one another with courtesy led to the construction of a simple method through the process of action research that goes beyond posting and repeating nice phrases. *Courtesy scripts* as a transferable strategy emerged.

By the midpoint of the year I no longer observed "highly negative" days in my classroom. By the final quarter of the year (month 7, 8 & 9), all days were categorized as "low" in verbal negativity because a new culture of cooperation had become a self-reinforcing habit. In reflecting on the language and behavior changes that took place, I found that using courtesy scripts facilitated all student interactions related to cooperation and virtually eliminated tattling. The process of tattling itself was transformed into an opportunity to practice the script among peers with teacher coaching. Social problems no longer needed to manifest themselves in conflict once children had a ready language to use. Courtesy scripts worked by allowing children to successfully make peer requests and productively respond to peers requests. Children's self-control increased because they gained ability to positively phrase their needs, while also being able to listen and respond positively to the needs of others. Interactions that would have triggered frustration, arguments or fights in the past became quickly and calmly solved using coached language. For example, the child who previously pushed, yelled or complained after being stepped on by her peer while waiting in line now knew how to say "will you please not step on my foot," using a calm voice, and the listener had an equally easy list of possible responses

(okay, sorry, or that wasn't me). As a result, children experienced solving interpersonal problems that previously would have escalated by using a script that allowed them to state their needs clearly, be heard, and have those needs met immediately. Below is the courtesy script we used, a variety of examples and a how-to-guide for teachers interested in using this method.

Courtesy Script # 1: Making a Request to Start or Stop Peers' Behavior

Goal: Children will use language to start or stop the behaviors of their peers in order to meet their own needs. When children are bothered by something, or need something, they will have the language to address it directly with each other.

Rationale: Talking directly with each other about our problems or requests builds autonomy. Children can solve their own problems and create change in the classroom on their own. This reduces tattling to almost zero (unless a child refuses to cooperate with the script). The please prompt and 3 responses facilitate a wide range of interactions and address most situations.

Child A: *"Will you please....."*

Child B: *Okay*

      Sorry

      That wasn't me

> *Tip:* Post the script using chart paper and practice it daily during the morning meeting.

Examples

1. "Will you please scoot over."

    a. *Okay*

2. "Will you please not draw on my paper."

    a. *Sorry*

3. "Will you please pass me a crayon."

      a. Okay

4. "Will you please not take my snack."

      a. That wasn't me

5. "Will you please not laugh at me…put away your trash…pick up your book bag," and so on.

How to Teach Courtesy Scripts to Children

1. Post the script on the wall (with corresponding picture support as necessary).

2. Model using the script using many real examples (provided above).

    a. Requests must start with "will you please."

    b. Requests must have a calm voice, not an angry and frustrated "WILL YOU PLEASE!"

    c. The response must be in a normal voice, not "OKAY!! *Gosh*."

    d. The response must be one of these three statements: *okay, sorry, that wasn't me.*

    e. And, we say "sorry" when:

        i. We mean it, *and*:

        ii. When we see that the other person is unhappy because of what we did or said.

    f. We cannot ignore a "will you please…" request.

3. *What about tattling?*

    a. Do you tell the teacher if someone took your crayon? No. Use your please request. *May I please have the crayons back? We can share them.* Do you tell the teacher if someone took your snack off your desk? No. Use your please request. *May I please have my snack back?*

b. What do you do if you make a "will you please" request and the other person does not do anything or does not respond? **Then you tell the teacher.** (At this point, the teacher will call the two children to her and have them talk through the problem using the script).

4. Teacher and student role-play together in front of the class daily during morning meetings.

5. Children practice repeating the script with a partner each day in the morning meeting. For example, the teacher starts the routine by saying, "Tell your partner two 'will you pleases.' Your partner will answer with *okay, sorry* or *that wasn't me*."

   a. Remind children that they must respond when someone uses a please request with them.

   b. Remind children that if someone ignores a please request, or does not reply in a courteous way (with one of the three responses), then they tell the teacher.

6. Make a big deal (Kersey and Masterson, 2013) over various children who are using the please request and proper responses. Watch and listen carefully to all interactions to make sure that children are using the script. Intervene with reminders throughout the day as children are learning this habit.

Edwardo and Sondra Demonstrate the Courtesy Script Routine During a Morning Meeting

Just as two children might go through greetings, songs and the calendar routine in your classroom, they can also role-play in pairs how to speak with courtesy. The teacher invites the children to turn to a partner and say three "will you pleases." Children know to ask each other, "would you like to go first?" to decide who speaks first. The two children take turns making up three please statements and then responding to the statements using the courtesy script.

Let's listen in as Sondra and Edwardo practice their courtesy script. Edwardo is thinking of realistic scenarios during the school day when he might use a please statement. He poses his requests to Sondra, who replies by using one of the 3 responses. While Edwardo and Sondra take turns to practice the courtesy scripts, the rest of the class is doing the same thing with their shoulder partner. Each child practices making 3 please requests about a realistic situation (in italics below).

Edwardo: "Will you please *put away the headphones*."

Sondra: "Okay"

Edwardo: "Will you please *use kind words*."

Sondra: "Sorry."

Edwardo: "Will you please *not draw on my paper*."

Sondra: "That wasn't me."

In this example, the courtesy script is facilitating all interactions that involve making requests. Children learn that making a request is done in a peaceful and thoughtful manner and that in a relationship of respect with another person we respond to their requests with a similar attitude of peacefulness and thoughtfulness.

If a common peer interaction (like sharing) needs additional coached language supports to promote children's independence, teachers can create additional responses. Courtesy script # 2 shows how 3 responses to a "please share" request can facilitate all sharing related interactions.

Courtesy Script # 2: Sharing

Child A: Will you please share (this/that item) with me?

Child B: *Yes*

   In two minutes (sets the timer)

This is not for sharing (food or certain personal items)

The sharing script implies that everything will be shared eventually (either immediately or in a few minutes using a timer procedure) unless sharing the item is not wise or allowed. The skill of setting a child-friendly timer will need to be modeled and then practiced by children. If the teacher helps Person B follow through and pass the item as soon as the timer goes off, this routine becomes automatic.[1] Using timers for sharing is especially useful during free play periods (Kersey and Masterson, 2013).

Discussion

Through a process of iterative teacher inquiry across one academic year as a first-grade teacher, I learned how to promote courteous language skills to improve peer relationships, self-control and a peaceful classroom community. The teacher action research process eventually produced the "courtesy script" method for structuring children's two-way communication around making requests and responding prosocially to the needs of peers. Findings suggest that this method was effective in the target classroom, warranting further study.

This paper reinforces existing research regarding the relationship between children's language and their behavior (Ketelaars et al., 2010; Hartas, 2011; Law, Rush and McBean, 2014; Vriens-van Hoogdalem, de Haan and Boom, 2016). It further supports the need to transform hurtful peer language in the classroom (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995) and concludes that implementing high expectations for children's kind and courteous language is both essential and practical (Smith-Bonahue, Smith-Adcock and Ehrentraut, 2015). As this inquiry also demonstrates, giving children the words they need to navigate social relationships is a skill

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[1] I have watched children as young as three set a digital timer to two minutes and then share the requested item when the timer sounds with no teacher assistance.

teachers may be learning on their own (Dixon, 2016), suggesting that teacher education and professional development programs ought to include methods like courtesy scripts in their curricula. In professional development I provided to early childhood educators in Philadelphia, courtesy scripts were one of many guidance strategies taught to support social-emotional learning (Haslip, Allen-Handy and Donaldson, 2018). Future research on the courtesy scripts method should include a large, representative sample of children across income and racial backgrounds, using an experimental or quasi-experimental design and a norm-referenced, valid and reliable measure of children's social-emotional learning[2] to predict the likelihood that using courtesy scripts will improve children's outcomes in areas such as increased self-regulation, positive relationships, prosocial behavior and decreased challenging behaviors.

Just as an actor learns to embody the life of a character though a script, so too do children learn to emulate courteous language using what I call "courtesy scripts." Courtesy scripts are matching phrases for the speaker and the listener that facilitate making requests. For example, when needing to make a request of someone, such as passing the crayons or sharing the paper, it is kind and feels respectful to say, "will you please" before the request. Saying "will you please…" does not invite the other person to refuse because the other person also has a script to follow to respond courteously, by saying things like "okay" and abiding by reasonable requests.

Teachers can create a variety of courtesy scripts with exact phrases for child A and child B to say to one another, in a call and response manner. These phrases can then be practiced in a classroom meeting, as easily as a greeting activity is practiced between two or more children. Once teachers get the idea of posting and practicing courtesy scripts with children, they can create language that facilitates respectful and helpful learning-oriented behavior in the

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[2] For example, see the Devereux Students Strengths Assessment (Nickerson & Fishman, 2009; LeBuffe, Shapiro & Robitaille, 2018).

classroom. Scripts can easily be adapted to the cultural context of non-Western and non-English speaking settings. All teachers need to do is post the desired script on the wall (using pictures as needed), have children practice them with each other and then reinforce their use while the children are working and playing throughout the day. Of course, teachers will model the language themselves.

Conclusion

When children do not know how to make requests peacefully, or reply to requests respectfully, several problems arise. They may be silent and withdraw, not knowing how to speak up to explain what they need. They may speak out in a demanding and angry tone, disrupting learning. Or they may go the teacher repeatedly for numerous peer-related concerns and conflicts. Therefore, coached language supports can be a transformative component of the social-emotional curriculum. I witnessed a peaceful environment envelop the classroom community once courtesy scripts were internalized by my first-grade students. The following year I moved to second grade and introduced courtesy scripts immediately. By the mid-point of the year the math interventionist who regularly visited commented that our classroom was the most peaceful in the school. By the end of the year, the principal was sending visitors and other teachers to observe our class.

There is perhaps no greater feeling of magic than to see one's entire class interacting with dignity, independently of you. A peaceful, productive classroom is a joy to witness. To create such an environment, teachers can use courtesy scripts to facilitate every type of interpersonal interaction. Through sustained and careful observation, teachers can discover how to guide children to use kind language in any cultural context. This teacher inquiry raises important questions for future study about the relationship between courteous language usage, emotional

self-regulation and a positive classroom climate. Courtesy scripts are so simple that children

readily master the language patterns they introduce. Children experience success in expressing

and meeting their needs, making the practice of courtesy self-motivating. For teachers, courtesy

scripts provide an easy and effective foundation for improving cooperation and self-control so

that learning continues uninterrupted.

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