

## **Don't Read This Column, Please**

Consider the two following commands used recently in my house.

"Do not throw the fork on the floor."

*and*

"Please put the fork gently on the table."

These commands were, of course, aimed at the toddler. In truth, both resulted in the fork being thrown on the floor. Which in turn, resulted in the fork being taken away and the boy being excused from the table.

But in theory, parenting experts say that your best bet is to phrase your desired outcome in the positive. Instead of saying "Do not hit," say, "Keep your hands to yourself." Instead of saying, "Don't shout," say, "Please use an inside voice." Instead of saying, "Stop peeing in your pants," say, "Get to the potty right now!"

Apparently this positive approach works on children of all ages.

"I won't hit a deer on my way home," I told my dad last week as I walked out his front door. I was about to drive home toward Telluride from Montrose.

"You mean, you're going to drive home safely," he corrected me.

"Right," I said. "I will drive home safely." And I did.

Dad's right. As usual. A mantra should be phrased in the positive.

I remember this, of course, from linguistics. In cognitive terms, "not wanting to hit a deer" is not the same as "arriving home safely" and the negative phrasing tends to keep the "negative" idea at the forefront of the mind.

At work here is a psychological phenomenon known as LINK TBA, in which the human brain has a more difficult time processing negations. Apparently, the brain first processes "don't want X" along the lines of "having X," and then inserts the "don't." The bottom line: if you focus on what you do not want, on some level the brain imagines the object to be avoided more than it sticks to the relational word "not." And what you pay attention to is what tends to arrive in your life. Law of attraction.

My favorite example of this comes from cognitive scientist and linguist George Lakoff, who writes in "Don't Think of an Elephant" that he gives his Berkeley students in Cognitive Science 101 an initial exercise. "The exercise is: Don't think of an elephant. Whatever you do, do not think of an elephant. I've never found a student who is able to do this. Every word, like elephant, evokes a frame, which can be an image or other kinds of knowledge: Elephants are large, have floppy ears and a trunk, are associated with circuses, and so on. The word is defined relative to that frame. When we negate a frame, we evoke the frame."

He also cites the example of Richard Nixon, who learned this lesson the hard way. Under pressure to resign, Nixon addressed the nation on TV post-Watergate and said, "I am not a crook."

Everyone heard he was a crook.

Not only do you plant the negative seed, you also delay your desired outcome. A study done by the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in "ScienceDaily" showed that negative-voiced sentences took longer for participants to respond to than positive-voiced ones due to an increase in information-processing requirements.

Of course, it's sometimes quite difficult to think of a positive way to phrase something, especially if there's some necessary haste. For instance, how would you immediately rephrase, "Don't eat that mushroom!" Hindsight suggests that "Spit it out" or "Drop it" or even "Stop!" would all be

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good choices. But I have found that the mind easily races to the worst case scenario. Result: I don't easily blurt out a positive statement.

Um. See?

Well, you might try, as I am, to listen to the statements that come out of your mouth and fall out into your writing. Whether you're coaching skiing, inspiring your coworkers, reciting a mantra or trying to feed the kids dinner, if you hear a negative come out, try to rephrase it immediately in the positive.

But do not listen to what I say. Try it yourself.

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