



## **Declarative vs Imperative Communication** **Enhancing communication and thinking skills** **with your child**

The way we talk has been broken down into what is known as ‘declarative’ and ‘imperative’ communication. Imperatives are anything that demand a response from the child. **Questions** are imperative (asking ‘what did you do today?’ demands that the child tell us the answer) and **requests** are as well (‘come eat your breakfast’ also demands a particular, known response). Imperative statements don’t require a lot of thinking about.

Declarative communication is intended to be used to *share experiences* or make comments about the world around us. For example, ‘wow, that’s a funny dog’ and ‘I think your feet will be cold’ are declarative statements. Declarative communication require your child to *think about* what you have said and formulate a unique response. (Think of the range of potential responses to either of the above statements as opposed to the single answer required to a direct question).

The main thing is the **intent** of the communication. In declarative communication, the intent is to **share our experiences**. A response is invited but **not demanded**. Declarative communication is open-ended, there is no right or wrong way to respond. In imperative communication, a particular response is expected.

Using more declarative communication can have two main pay-offs:

- 1. It will encourage your child to think more about his environment and to problem solve without the need to be prompted so often.**

For example, consider the thought processes required between the following:

Imp: Pick up your shoes

Decl: I think you will have cold feet if you go outside now

Imp: Say goodbye to Johnny

Decl: Johnny is going home now

Imp: Don't forget your gameboy

Decl: Hmm, I wonder what you are planning to do in the car

- 2. It encourages more experience sharing conversation (as opposed to question and answer type communication) as your child is exposed to your thoughts and feelings more. Conversation becomes easier and more natural.**

Studies have shown that neuro typical children (and adults) use declarative language about 80% of the time and imperative language only 20% of the time. Children with AS / ADHD type difficulties use as much as 95% imperative language. They tend to use conversation to get their needs met ('can I have a biscuit?', 'where is my charger?') or to 'information dump' ('did you know that in Star Wars...'). They tend not to make general statements or to use conversation to share experiences like neuro-typical children do. Often what happens then is that we talk back to the children using imperative language ourselves. So instead of sharing our experiences like we do with neuro-typical children we tend instead to ask children with AS lots and lots of questions in order to get a verbal response from them. This often makes for difficult, stilted conversations. It also means that the child isn't doing a lot of *thinking about* our perspectives.

Consider the following imperative conversation:

Parent: How was your day?

Child: Good

Parent: What did you do at lunch time?

Child: Played with James

Parent: What did you play?

Child: Cards

The conversation can go on and on in this very stilted, question and answer format. The child doesn't enjoy being asked so many questions and the adult doesn't enjoy having to ask so many questions. In this type of very imperative conversation the child gets no exposure to the other persons perspective, thoughts or feelings ('I like the blue one'), no exposure to ideas about imagining forward in time ('I hope Johnny is there') or reflecting on past experiences ('last time I was here I had the chocolate one and it was delicious'), memories ('I remember when you fell off that'), predictions ('I bet I can do this faster than Suzy') etc etc.

Children exposed to more declarative communication become more declarative communicators themselves. They also tend to become more aware and then more interested in others perspectives, ideas etc.

## **Tips for changing communication**

1. Talk less rather than more. When you do speak, make it more thoughtful.
2. Make sure you get your child's attention *before* you speak to him rather than just repeating yourself several times.
3. Use more non verbal communication. This ties in with speaking less. Your child may not be noticing non verbal communication, like facial expressions, body language etc. The more you speak to him the less he needs to rely on these other aspects of communication. So, try when you can to replace words with appropriate gestures. In response to a 'where is my...' question, point at where it is. In response to a 'can I have...' question nod instead of saying 'yes'.
4. Aim for about an 80:20 ratio of declarative to imperative communication.
5. Declarative communication will take your child longer to process than imperative, especially initially. Pause after you make a statement and count to 45 before saying anything else.
6. If you need something done just give a direct order rather than trying to make a declarative statement and then immediately following it up an imperative.
7. Most importantly of all... if you say something declarative and your child doesn't respond, it's ok. Don't follow it up with a question or demand. Declarative communication invites a response but doesn't demand one.

Examples of declaratives and imperatives follow...

<b>Declarative</b>	<b>Imperative</b>
We had fun today!	What did we do today?
That's a really big truck that went by!	What's that?
Let's go swimming!	What do you want to do?
I see some biscuits	Which one do you want?
I wonder what is going to happen next.	What is going to happen next?
Uh oh, your coat is on the floor.	Pick up your coat!
I like ice cream the best.	Do you like ice cream?
That's so funny!	Did you like that?
Blue is my favorite color	What color is that?
I'm afraid of big roller coasters.	What ride do you want to go on next?
We can do it together.	Copy me.
I want to give you a hug.	Come here.
It makes me sad when you do that.	Don't do that.
I heard that you went on a field trip today.	What did you do today at school?
You are walking too fast for me.	Slow down!
I can't see you.	Look at the camera.
Billy is leaving now.	Say "goodbye" to Billy.

<b>More declaratives:</b>
You are so amazing!
Oops – I made a mistake.
I think I'm going to eat too much, but it'll be good.
We can surprise Mommy!
We'll have to come back again soon.
A big wave is coming!
The baby giraffe is running!
That was hard but you tried and you did it.
You're not afraid any more because you're so grown up.
Oh no, the dog is trying to eat your shoe!
You don't have to go on that ride if you don't want to.
I wish it would stop raining.
I know what we can do
That cloud looks like a merry-go-round.
I like this restaurant.
What a mess!
Hmm – I wonder what we can do?
I went to your school today too.

*Using declaratives takes the pressure off of the child to perform and provide the right answer. Declaratives are also invitations to interact while questions are typically cues to provide a right answer.” S Gutstein*

## **Declarative Sentence Starters**

I'd like to know if...

I wonder if...

I see...

I like...

I can't

I want to..

I went...

I'm going to...

Let's...

I'm tired of...

I'm guessing you...

You must have been...

That (e.g. car looks like it has broken down)

That is a...(e.g. big mess)

Your... (e.g. book is on the floor)

You are... (e.g. talking to fast for me)

You don't have to...

Any compliments or celebrations – 'well done, you did it'