

USING CLEAR LANGUAGE

Structured
Teaching

Why do we need to use clear language?

When we are considering the next step for a child, we need to be clear about what they can do now and what the plans are for the next step.

Describing learning clearly is of crucial importance. Unless a description can be made which is clear, precise, observable and means exactly the same to all concerned, it is impossible to agree what the child can do and consequently what to work on next. For example, if children with SEND are described using terms such as 'delayed', 'lacking in concentration', and 'uncooperative', does this give an understanding of their needs and what is happening? Words such as these mean different things to different people, so if we are to describe children's learning and progress clearly, we need to avoid using language that is open to interpretation.

CLOUDY STATEMENTS

Cloudy statements are vague statements about learning that are open to many interpretations. They are vague, imprecise descriptions, e.g. '*he understands colours*'. Cloudy statements mean different things to different people. For the purpose of clear communication, 'cloudy statements' should be avoided.



CLEAR STATEMENTS

Clear statements are statements about learning that are open to few interpretations and can be seen or heard. Using clear statements to describe what a child can do and the next step you want the child to learn makes it easier to:

- decide whether or not the child can do it
- identify what help the child needs in order to learn the next step.



Compare:

'Archie knows the concept red.'

to:

'Archie will pick out all the red objects from a selection of red and blue objects on request.'

AVOIDING CLOUDY STATEMENTS

Can it be seen or heard?

If the word can be 'seen' or 'heard' then you know you have a word that is open to few interpretations, e.g. walk, recite, write and touch. Words that are open to many interpretations include: know, enjoy, understand and listen.

ELEMENTS OF A CLEAR TEACHING TARGET

**One of the key Portage Principles is breaking down activities into small steps to enable children to learn.
These steps are written as teaching targets.**

A teaching target is expressed using clear language. Being clear about the target ensures that everyone will know exactly what the next step is for the child.

Here is an example of a teaching target that is unclear:

'I want Billy to be more independent'

'Independent' could mean many things. It could mean that Billy will:

- make a cup of tea without help
- dress himself in all his clothes
- choose what he wants to wear
- play without adult intervention for 20 minutes
- sit with the other children for a drink at the Parent & Toddler Group.

Rather than using the word 'independent', a more precise statement should be made. We need to make a clear statement of what we will see or hear Billy do to demonstrate that he has become more independent.

Below are some other words that are often used when describing learning but which are not helpful, as they do not describe clearly what the child will do or say.

Alternative words are suggested which are less open to different interpretations:

Words that are cloudy	Alternatives that state exactly what you mean
Identify	✓ point to ✓ name
Understand (<i>e.g. numbers</i>)	✓ give the amount requested ✓ count the number of items
Listen	✓ answer questions afterwards ✓ retell part of the story
Know (<i>e.g. the alphabet</i>)	✓ say the alphabet ✓ point to the letters when named

Words such as **run, jump, hop, sit, match, repeat, name** and **count** state things that can be observed. Words like these should be used when writing teaching targets.

Teaching targets must include the answers to four questions:

1. who?
2. **does what?**
3. under what conditions?
4. *to what degree of success?*

WHO?

This relates to the child for whom the teaching target is aimed at.

DOES WHAT?

When selecting a target for the child we must ensure we use clear language so that it can be seen or heard. Only then can we observe when a child has learned a skill.

Examples of how to state '**does what?**'

- Billy **will count to five**
- Safia **will jump with both feet together**
- Farhan **will turn his head to look at a light-up toy**

UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS?

The conditions are crucial in enabling the child to succeed. We have to consider very carefully how we set up the activity to give the child the best chance for success. The question we need to ask is "What needs to be put in place for the child to complete the task?"

The amount and nature of help the child will receive must be written in the target and is the key condition.

When setting a teaching target, we must decide how much the child can reasonably be expected to learn and in what time frame. Sometimes we can expect the child to

do something without support. At other times, though, we will still have to give help, but the amount of help will be reduced.

Conditions are also about the environment, materials and people involved. We may need to consider the size of the group the child is in, whether he/she is working with a familiar adult, where it takes place and what materials are being used.

Examples of how to write 'under what conditions?'

- Auguste **will name 3 animals** in imitation of his brother
- Carly **will drink from a cup** when dad holds the cup up to her mouth
- Sula **will sign 'teddy'**, when mum holds up teddy and says 'Who's this Sula?'
- Arthur **will point to the big panda** when Mum holds up big panda and little panda, on verbal request

TO WHAT DEGREE OF SUCCESS?

This tells us how well the child must do the task before we can say that he/she has succeeded. It is important to be sure that the child has had the opportunity to practise and secure the skill before you move on to a new target. At the same time, you do not want to keep working on something the child can already do.

The degree of success is the number of times a child responds successfully out of the total number of times practiced. A timescale or frequency factor could also be used to decide whether a child has been successful.

For most of us, most of the time, some margin of error in what we do is inevitable. Some tasks though, such as ones that involve being safe, demand a high success level. What criteria we set, therefore, will depend to some extent on the nature of the task. Initially, we may set a low level of success and gradually increase this.

Examples of how to state ‘to what degree of success?’

- Bobby **will catch a large ball** when it is rolled towards him along the floor 7/10 attempts
- Laurie **will name 6 farm animals** when an adult points to them in a book 5/6 attempts
- Jasmine **will put her shoes on the correct feet** when an adult places them in front of her 3 days out of 7
- Stevie **will sit on the floor** without aid for 30 seconds

SUMMARY

Putting all of these elements together creates a very precise, detailed teaching target that ensures anyone who works with the child can understand what is required and know how to set up appropriate learning activities that enable the child to experience success.

- who?
- **does what?**
- under what conditions?
- *to what degree of success?*

Some additional examples are shown below:

- Lee **will look at an adult when his name is called**, in an adult-led small group activity, 4/5 tries.
- Bashir **will name red**, when given the initial sound prompt ‘It’s r,r...’, 3/6 tries.

- Pam **will walk forward 6 steps**, when her parent holds both her hands and she is wearing her Pedro boots, *6/8 tries*.
- Chang **will put the third brick on top of the tower of two bricks**, when his parent holds the bottom two bricks to steady them, *4/6 tries*.
- Barbara **will put a six piece puzzle together**, without any help at playgroup, *2/3 tries*.

One of the most rewarding things about being part of children's learning is to see them achieve. If our targets use clear language, we will have the satisfaction of seeing / hearing when it has been achieved.