

“Magic” Sentences: Prevent Conflict, Negotiate and Take Care of Yourself
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“Magic Sentences” (or key phrases) are practical ways to use language to prevent, minimize or de-escalate conflicts with kids. Different sentences will be useful in different situations. These examples represent a win-win approach to relationships with young people and can be equally effective in interactions with other adults.

“Great first draft.”

Use when kids turn in work that is incomplete, illegible or incorrect. Invites kids to redo, complete, clean up or self-correct their work.

“We’ll try again later.”

For times when you withdraw a positive consequence (ask kids to sit somewhere else, stop reading the story). This keeps the door open for kids to try again and make better choices at a later time.

“This isn’t working.”

This is an excellent way to interrupt disruptive or off-task behavior without attacking or criticizing.

“I know you wish you could...”

Validates a child’s desire to do something (not go to a particular class, go to the nurse or go home, hit a classmate, not take a test, etc.) when that option is not available or not negotiable.

“That won’t work for me.”

Here’s a simple, non-attacking way to reject a student’s suggestion when it proposes something inappropriate or inadequate for your objectives. You can validate the worth of the proposal (“Interesting idea” or “Oh, that *does* sound like it would be fun”) and, if appropriate, even offer to look for opportunities to offer that suggestion at another time.

“Think of a solution that will work for both of us.”

Transfers responsibility to a dissatisfied student to find a solution that will work for him and for you (and not become a problem for anyone else).

“Can you live with that?”

This helps to affirm commitment after coming to an agreement.

“Tell me what you just agreed to (do).”

Confirms the student’s understanding of an agreement, making sure you and the student are on the same page.

“Humor me.”

Use this when you ask for something that seems unreasonable, ask for something just because it’s important to you, or have to give seemingly needless instructions. This works best when mutually respectful relationships have been established.

“Because we’re all different, and we all get to succeed.”

This is a good response when questioned about why different students are on different pages, have different assignments or different requirements, or are taught in different ways.

“Equally appropriately challenged.”

A 21st-century definition of “fair” (as opposed to “fair” meaning “same”); allows different kids to be on different pages, have different assignments or different requirements, or be taught in different ways.

“We don’t say that here.”

This is a non-attacking response to a student’s hurtful or offensive language.

“My door is open.”

Here’s an invitation to come and talk. It indicates an awareness of a troubled student’s situation without being invasive. This is most effective in a high-trust relationship and emotionally safe environment.

“We don’t need to talk about that.”

Use this to disengage from gossip or toxic interchanges. Also try “That’s none of my business” or “I appreciate your concern.” Change the subject immediately to make it clear that you do not wish to continue the discussion. (More likely to be used with other adults.)

“Thank you for sharing.”

This is a way to disengage from unnecessary information, criticism, or a toxic exchange without becoming defensive or attempting to self-justify, which is likely to expose you to more of the same.

NOTE: Consider negotiating with kids (getting their input and ideas) because:

- It’s a great way to communicate your limits. (It’s not giving in! Honest!)
- It’s a great way to secure a commitment.
- It’s a great way to be sure they understand both what you want and what they can expect (positive consequences) if they follow through on their end.
- It’s a great way to accommodate kids’ needs for power and autonomy without compromising your own authority.
- Sometimes they can come up with better solutions and ideas than we can!

Excerpted and adapted from *The Win-Win Classroom*, revised edition, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.

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