



# Using Indirect Language in the Early Years

Tip Sheet

Indirect language provides a way for educators to phrase demands or instructions differently. This can offer a greater sense of choice and autonomy, which can be supportive for a child's regulation and reduce stress.

## When to use indirect language:

Some children experience dysregulation or a stress response when given direct instructions. Signs of dysregulation can vary from subtle to overt, including:

- Creating distractions, e.g., changing the topic of conversation.
- Giving excuses, e.g., "My legs aren't working."
- Negotiating with the adult.
- Avoiding interactions: shutting down, running away, withdrawing into role play or fantasy.

## Considerations:

Before using indirect language with a child, it is important to consider whether this strategy is the best fit for their communication style and skills. Points for reflection may include:

- What support does the child currently require to understand what is being said?
- What vocabulary does the child understand?
- How much language can the child process at a time?
- How does the child currently respond to direct instructions?
- Does the child show curiosity when they hear comments about things happening in the environment?

If indirect language does not suit the child's communication style and skills, consider other supports for instructions, such as:

- Using object, visual or environmental cues to support instructions
- Peer or adult modelling of the instruction
- Incorporating choice into instructions e.g., "Do you want to walk like a frog, or a dinosaur to the toilet?"

## Tips for using indirect language:

- Make statements, comments or observations which aim to encourage a child to notice what is going on around them.
- Use verbs which model thinking out loud.
- Use first person pronouns to encourage a child to engage and join you in an activity  
Talk to yourself/to no one in particular to 'plant an idea.'

## Examples of indirect language:

### Play

"I wonder how we can keep the sand safely in the sandpit."

"I can see your body wants to be up high. I wonder where we could find a safe place to climb."

"I think your friend is waiting for a turn."

### Mealtimes

"I can see your friends are sitting down to eat."

"Playing can make us thirsty. I wonder what you can do when you feel thirsty."

"I wonder where you can find your lunchbox."

"I notice that our friends are putting their lunchboxes back on the trolley."

"I can smell something yummy. I wonder what is for lunch today."

### Group Time

"I wonder where you will sit at group time."

"I notice that your body gets jostled when you sit in the middle of the group. I wonder where a good place would be to sit to have some personal space."

"I notice that our friends are sitting on the mat. I wonder what story we will have today."

"I heard Miss X. ring the bell. I wonder what that means."

### Transitioning

"I notice that our friends are lining up."

"I wonder what you will play when we go inside/outside."

"I can't wait to see what you will do first when you go inside/outside."

### Sun Smart

"I wonder what you need to put on your head to keep you sunsafe."

"Hmm. I think there is something missing from the top of your head."

"The ground is very hot/cold/wet. I wonder how you can protect your feet."

"I can see your friends putting on their sunscreen. I wonder how you can keep sunsafe."

### Washing Hands

"I notice there is paint on your hands. I wonder how you will get it off."

"I wonder what you could do before eating to ensure your hands are clean."

### Pack Up Time

"I can see some toys on the floor. I wonder if you know where they go."

"Hmm. I think that toy car is lost. I wonder if you could help it to find its way home."

"There's a gap on this shelf. I wonder whether you can find what goes in this space."