

'I' Statements and How They Work

As part of the health curriculum in the Junior School each teacher guides their students in learning to express their feelings using 'I' statements, especially if the situation is at all contentious. This, in effect, validates the way a child feels and allows no minimisation of those feelings.

'I' statements are most valuable for everyone, not just children, of course! Here's how they work:

What is an 'I' statement and how do we use it?

An 'I' statement or 'I' message is a very effective technique to convey to the listener (children, partners, colleagues, or anyone in fact) how they have or someone else has caused you to feel. It is a style of communication that, rather than directing blame or criticism to the listener, makes feelings or beliefs of the speaker the focus. This technique allows us to communicate what is upsetting, while minimising blame. If our statements feel blaming, the person we are trying to speak to will often become defensive, e.g. 'You' statements can make the recipient feel blamed or criticised.

'I' statements are a simple way we can teach children to communicate effectively, especially when there is a risk of contention or conflict. Using 'I' statements to communicate to your children will work as a model to help them to use them too. At St Mary's Junior School, we actively teach and encourage the use of 'I' statements/messages as a strategy before enlisting the help of an adult when/if feelings have been hurt. You may have seen posters on classroom walls in support of what the children are learning.

Constructing 'I' statements

When angry, frustrated, hurt or fearful, the words chosen to communicate feelings can either escalate or relieve the level of anger and intensity. Of course, 'I' statements work just as well when praising someone too; they are not just for negative/hurt feelings.

'I' statements help us to express feelings in a manner that is less likely to provoke a negative response from your listener. 'I' statements can take many forms. As you become more practised in constructing them, you will most likely find yourself coming up with variations. When you first begin using them, it is helpful to have an initial template to follow.

'I' statements have three parts. Each part is stated in the following order:

1. 'I feel' or 'I need'.
2. The event that evoked your feeling(s) or desire.
3. The effect the event has on you.
4. Combine the parts to form a sentence.

For example:

'I feel _____ when _____,
because _____.'

An adult might say: 'I feel undervalued when you interrupt me, because it seems you don't care about my idea.'

A child might say: 'I feel sad/rejected when you leave me alone in the playground because I thought we were friends.'

For 'I' statements to be effective we need a vocabulary of emotion words. Young children often know happy, sad, angry, frustrated and scared and as they grow, so should their emotional language. It is powerful to use more expressive emotion words for negative feelings such as irritated, miserable, disappointed, embarrassed, hurt, jealous, abandoned, rejected, misunderstood, miserable, tearful, worried, overwhelmed, exasperated, horrified, perplexed, resentful, suspicious.

Turning 'You' statements to 'I' statements

'I' statements allow you to communicate what is upsetting while minimising blame. If our statements feel blaming, the person we are trying to speak to will often become defensive. 'You' statements can make the recipient feel blamed or criticised.

For example:

Instead of saying, 'You don't care about me at all', an 'I' statement might be, 'I feel unloved...'

'I feel unloved when you don't message me back because I like to know you are thinking of me'.

'I' statements are almost as effective without giving the reason for the feeling, such as the examples below. This shortened version of the 'I' statement works well for young children to use.

'You're never on time' is changed to 'I feel abandoned and worried when you keep me waiting'.

'You are rude when you talk about the party I am not invited to' is changed to 'I feel jealous when you talk about the party'.

'You always go off and play with someone else' is changed to 'I feel rejected when you play with...'

'I' messages go a long way to helping adults and children to express themselves without losing their cool. They get the message across about how you and they feel and the behaviour that caused the feelings – all without laying blame or sounding critical. 'I' messages are a simple way to communicate in most situations, however simple is not to be confused with easy – it takes skill and lots of practice. We would love to hear about your experiences trying this technique.

For more information on the use of 'I' statements, please refer to the following links:

<https://compassioncoach.com/blog/when-use-i-statements>

<https://www.communicationandconflict.com/i-statements.html>

<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/i-message>

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

SMC Counsellors

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au