

**Kids Say the Darndest Things,  
Just Make Sure It's in English**

by Sheila K. Berenson and Joshua K. Hartshorne

Word Count: 1498

Tagline.

Teaching English to children is reward but tough. To help you survive, Joshua Hartshorne combines his English-teaching experience (Europe, Siberia, Taiwan) with Sheila Berenson's twenty years of teaching children of all ages in the United States.

Suppose you are an expert at teaching English – or, if you’re not, you’ve read everything *Transitions Abroad* has to say on the subject and feel up to the challenge. A few parents want to hire you to tutor their 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders in English. They are willing to pay more than what you could get for teaching a high-school student (true in Taiwan and many other countries). You think to yourself, “Kids are cute. This’ll be fun.”

Sure, kids *are* cute. It’s fun to watch them explore the world and learn new concepts. Trying to help them with that learning, though, can be a humbling experience. Here’s how to keep your head and keep your job:

### *Motivating children.*

The best way to encourage a child to learn – as with anyone – is to motivate them. You can motivate some high-school students by reminding them that knowing English will help them find a job. That isn’t going to go very far with a kid in elementary school. Little ones work for stars and stickers, not resumes.

You have two options: make the activity intrinsically rewarding or extrinsically rewarding. Extrinsic rewards, such as good grades and stickers, are the easiest to offer, but you risk making the child dependent on the reward to the extent that she refuses to do the learning activity unless you reward her. Remove the reward, and often the activity stops.

### *Using extrinsic rewards.*

The first step is to pick your reward. Here it helps to know what is considered important to the children with whom you are working. Is it Pokemon cards? Hello Kitty stickers? Award ribbons are recognized by all ages and all genders.

You can also set up your activity as a contest, which works for almost all activities. One simple system is to give the students a “point” for every word/question/phrase they answer correctly. However, when they miss, you, the teacher, “earn” the point. As long as the activity is at the children’s level, they should earn far more points than you do. The children look at the score sheet, know that their points are the answers they gave correctly, and feel very, very smart. Besides, kids love beating adults, and in this game, they always, always win.

### *Intrinsic rewards.*

Ideally, you will instill in your student the fiery passion to learn, learn, learn! Failing that, make the activities fun. Kids like anything dressed up as a game,

and they aren't generally sophisticated enough to figure out that this is in fact a grammar exercise, not a game.

Just about any activity can be turned into a game. Are you teaching the letters of the alphabet to young children? Every time the student names a letter correctly, toss a ball and let them run to catch it.

The more you ham it up, the better. A dry sense of humor may get adults falling out of their seats, but children are more likely just to fall asleep. When playing the "point" game, feel free to make a big deal about how you're going to beat them and act mortified and devastated when they get a point.

Keep your example sentences silly and funny. "James walks his dog" is not nearly so intriguing a phrase as "The dog walks James," which also pales before "Polka-dot zebras dance upside down in my living room." Pay attention to what gets giggles and try more of that.

*Smart kid.*

You should set up your class so that the students leave feeling intelligent. Even more important is to not let them leave feeling dumb. Since young children are much less likely to be motivated by some long-term reward—a good college, a good job or even a good grade—if they get discouraged, they quickly give up.

Students are quick to sense when you are complimenting them for failure (Remember how you scoffed at "We are all winners here" attitudes at camp or P.E?). Set up your activities so that there is a clear, accomplishable goal, like reading fifty words or getting three consecutive questions correct or writing a whole sentence in less than two minutes. Congratulate them when they succeed. Be careful that the task is in fact within the child's ability. It is better to start too easy and work up than start too hard and have to backtrack in failure.

Learn to quickly notice when the activity is too hard. Either find a way to make it easier--perhaps by giving them hints--or say you are going to "take a break" from that activity and quickly switch to something else.

Simple planning can help avoid this problem. For instance, correcting every mistake a child makes is a sure-fire way to get them to stop trying. Pick on task, such as subject-verb agreement, and concentrate on that. Talk about it, do activities, correct those mistakes and only those mistakes. Once they are getting comfortable – which could take anywhere from a few hours to a few months – add a new grammar point, like using plurals correctly. Be careful about moving to the next step too soon, as the child will quickly fail and you will have to backtrack.

*Better the mess of my own making.*

Sometimes, you can't figure out how to make an activity interesting. How fun can learning about participles be, after all? Here – and at other times – it helps to give you students a choice of activities. They're more likely to commit to an activity they picked themselves than some dumb activity that the teacher selected.

However, saying, "What do you want to do today?" won't work with everyone. Give them two or three choices to pick from. If you want them to choose a particular activity, it may help to stack the deck, as it were.

*Give the poor kid a break.*

There aren't many adults who can work five hours solid without so much as a coffee break, and there are even fewer children. Notice when their eyes start glazing over and they start to fidget. Tantrums are especially likely when the child is tired or bored. Changing activities frequently can help keep them alert, but from time to time, you should give them a break, be it a chance to run around or a 5-minute nap. This can sometimes be used as a reward to finish the activity ("Let's finish this page, then you can go get a drink of water").

*Autopilot – letting the children teach themselves.*

You learned a lot of your English by doing exactly what you are doing now: reading. Most of the rest you learned from talking to people. You learned very little in class. Keep that in mind.

Convincing the child to love reading will make your job easier and make you look like a brilliant teacher like nothing else will. You have only so many hours a week with your students; they have many hours in which they can read. Read in class. Send books home. Make it a competition, either by giving prizes to anyone who reads a set number of books/pages/words or by giving prizes to the students who read the most. You may choose to do both so that the better readers continue even after they have passed the first prize threshold and the children who know they can't possibly win still have a goal to work towards.

Make sure, though, that you help them pick out books at their level or a little easier. Reading is no fun if it is too much work. Also remember that some children will read if handed a book but can't go to the effort to pick out one on their own. Spend some time at the bookstore or come up with a list of books for them or ask your other teacher-friends. Having a selection they can pick from is especially helpful. Not everyone wants to read books about ponies on the one hand or about soldiers on the other.

If they read at home, you may have difficulty determining whether they actually read the book or are just saying they did. Having their parents sign off may help, especially if part of the rule is that the child must read aloud (which is typical for young children at beginning levels anyway). You can also require short book reports or give quizzes, but make sure that they are easy enough that it isn't an impediment to their desire to continue reading.

*Final words.*

Teaching small children isn't easy, but it can be rewarding. As noted before, it can sometimes pay much better in some countries. It is also, in some ways, easier. The behavior problems of young children, if frustrating, are often easier to deal with than those of a sullen teenager. Young children try to avoid assignments by hiding, quite visibly, under desks. Older students may use more devious methods—they may copy assignments from one another or from the Internet.

Plus, let's face it, the little ones are just cute.

bios:

Joshua Hartshorne graduated from Oberlin. He has taught everything from swing dancing to neurolinguistics, and has taught and tutored English on two continents. He currently writes free-lance from his base in Taipei, Taiwan.

Sheila Berenson graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has taught numerous subjects from the first grade level through college. Her specialty is reading education. She lives in Kansas.