

Kinda, Sorta, Like – You Know

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Once upon a time there was a girl who loved learning words. She used new words as soon as she heard them. One day she heard someone say, “ummmm,” in a long, drawn out way, while they were thinking of the next word to say. This, she thought, was very handy – people would keep listening, but it gave time to think. She tried it out:

“Mom, may I please have some, *ummmmm*, carrots at dinner?”

“Okay,” said mom, not really noticing her daughter’s new skill.

The next evening, she heard her babysitter say “like,” not in the way of “this red sock is like that red house because they’re both red,” but as a place holder, just the same way she was using “umm.” So she decided to try this, too.

“*Umm*, Mom? May I have some, *like*, peas at dinner?”

“Okay,” said mom, not remarking upon the new words.

The next day, the girl heard someone say “sorta,” meaning “sort of,” only it came out more quickly. It was also a good filler word, and she was really starting to enjoy them by this time. She tried out the new one: “*Ummm*, Mom? I *sorta* want to have some, *like*, cucumber at dinner.”

And Mom still said, “Okay,” so it seemed to be working just fine.

The following day, she heard someone say “kinda,” meaning “kind of,” and put it together with “sorta.” When she tried this out, it went:

“*Ummm*, Mom? I *kinda sorta* want to have some, *like* cabbage for dinner.”

Mom, who this whole time was just glad that her daughter was eating vegetables at all, noticed the new words, but still said, “Okay.”

The next day, the girl heard another new way to use words she already knew: someone said, “you know,” meaning “do you understand?” but not really waiting for an answer. It was another useful filler word: it made it look like she was asking a question and getting an answer, without even having to stop talking.

She tried it out on her mom: “*Ummmm*, Mom? I *kinda sorta* want to have some, *like, you know*, carrots for dinner.”

Mom looked at her a little quizzically, but still said, “Okay.”

A week after she heard her first filler word, someone said “Okay,” but not like her mom said it when she meant “yes, I agree,” but as another filler: it was a question, a way of sounding like a polite request for permission when really the person was saying “this is what I want” as in “I’m going to the store now, okay? Bye!” and running out the door. So she tried it out on her mom:

“*Ummm*, Mom? I *kinda sorta* want to have some, *like, you know*, green beans for dinner, *okay?*” as she reached into the vegetable drawer.

“Okay,” said her mom, with a narrowing of her eyes. Vegetables were good for her girl’s body, but all these filler words weren’t good for her speaking. The girl was starting to notice something, also. People weren’t listening to her as much anymore.

When she was shopping and needed to find the bathroom, and said “Umm, Ma’m, I kinda sorta want to know where the, like, you know, bathroom is, okay?” she could never get an answer because the person went off to help someone else who asked a polite, direct question such as “Excuse me, where are the bathing suits?”

When her mother asked her to get directions from a police officer and she said, “Umm, officer, we kinda sorta, need to get some, like, you know, directions to the umm, sports center, okay?” he was off helping someone who’d asked a polite, direct question such as “Pardon me, where is the sports arena?”

The girl started to clue in. She tried asking a polite, direct question, and making polite but direct statements: “Excuse me, Officer, where is the parking lot?” “Pardon me, ma’am, where are the leggings?” She got instant responses. She liked it. One night, she said to her mother, “Mom, I’d like to have carrots for dinner tonight, if that’s all right with you.”

Her mom looked at her with a small smile and said, “Okay.”

THE END

Epilogue

One day years later, the girl was with a friend at the movie theater, waiting in the snack line. It was taking a long time. No one seemed to be able to decide what they wanted to have. When she got to the head of the line, she said to the woman behind the counter “May I have a small popcorn, two lemonades and some nonpareils?” The woman gave her a stunned look, brought the food over, and watched the girl pull out exact change. She cocked her head and said to the girl, “Are you looking for a job? I’m the manager here, and as you can see, I’m short-staffed. You are the most polite and organized customer I’ve had all day. Everyone else took 20 words to say what they could say in 10 and was still making up their mind while they were talking. I need some new ticket sellers – would you like to try it out?”

The girl looked at her friend, smiled and said “Yes, thank you!”

So she started selling tickets in the little booth at the front of the theater. She liked to talk with people while the tickets were printing or the credit card was running through – she saw all sorts of people from town and was always nice to the younger children and adults and spoke with friends briefly while being sure she got her part of the work done. She was paid 7 dollars an

hour, but also got a bonus – 10 cents for every ticket she sold. She was very fast at making change and running credit cards, but she started to understand what the manager had said about people taking a long time to say what they wanted. People would come up to her counter and say, “Umm, can I have, umm, three tickets to the, you know, one o’clock showing of, you know, umm, *Adventure in the Amazon?*” It was a big waste of time, and stopped her from getting more people through the line faster.

So she put up a sign that said “This is the polite and direct line. If you are polite and direct with me, you’ll get in to see the movie faster.” And she told her friends who came to get tickets about how if they simply said, “May I have 3 tickets for the 1pm *Adventure in the Amazon?*” she’d be so much faster. So her friends tried it out, and it worked. Many of the grown ups who came to the theater liked it very much, and always chose her line. She could serve twice as many people because people in her line were taking half as long to ask for what they wanted as in the other lines. She was able to get twice as big a bonus as the other ticket sellers – 10\$ an hour during the rush -- because she could get through twice as many people as they did. One of the nice things was that, since she saved so much time not listening to wasted filler words, she could add some extra, nice words. The customers were happy because they got in faster and had some pleasant words with her, and she was happy because she was having nice exchanges with people, doing her job well and getting paid more for it.

One night, she went home to her mom, and said, “Mom, I never knew that words were so precious. I never want to waste another one as long as I live!”

“Sounds good to me,” said her mom with a big smile.

REALLY THE END