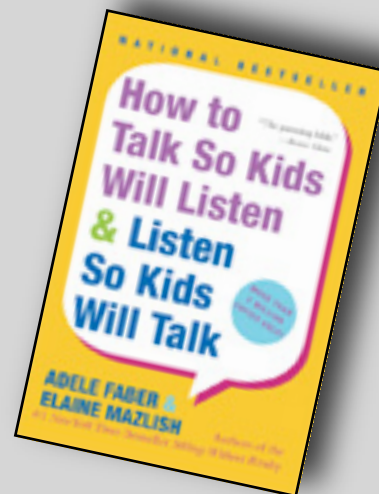


How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk

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Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers
Release Date: December 2004
ISBN: 978-0-380-81196-0

Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish are internationally acclaimed, award-winning experts on adult-child communication. Both lecture nationwide, and their group workshop programs are used by thousands of groups throughout the world to improve communication between children and adults.



A Letter to Readers

The last thing we ever thought we'd be doing was writing a "how to" book on communication skills for parents. The relationship between each parent and child is a very personal and private matter. The idea of giving anyone instructions on how to talk in such a close relationship just didn't feel right to us.

The more we talked about it, the more comfortable we became with the idea. Why not a "how to" book with exercises so that parents could teach themselves the skills they wanted to know? Why not a book with hundreds of examples of helpful dialogues so that parents could adapt this new language to their own personal style?

Suddenly our original uneasiness about writing a "how to" book vanished. Every other area of science has its skill books. Why not one for parents who want to learn how to talk so their kids will listen, and listen so their kids will talk?

Chapter 1: Helping Children Deal with Their Feelings

When I'm upset or hurting, the last thing I want to hear is advice, philosophy, psychology, or the other fellow's point of view. That kind of talk only makes me feel worse than before.

But let someone really listen, let someone acknowledge my inner pain and give me a chance to talk more about what's troubling me and I begin to feel less upset, less confused, more able to cope with my feelings and my problem.

The process is no different for our children. They too can help themselves if they have a listening ear and an empathic response. But the language of empathy does not come naturally to us. It's not part of our "mother tongue." Most of us grew up having our feelings denied. To become fluent in this new language of acceptance, we have to learn and practice its methods.

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Here are some ways to help children deal with their feelings.

1. **Instead of half-listening, listen with full attention.** It can be discouraging to try to get through to someone who gives only lip service to listening. It's much easier to tell your troubles to a parent who is really listening. He doesn't even have to say anything. Often a sympathetic silence is all a child needs.
2. **Instead of questions and advice, acknowledge with a word — "Oh ... Mmm ... I see."** It's hard for a child to think clearly or constructively when some-one is questioning, blaming, or advising her. There's a lot of help to be had from a simple "Oh ... umm ..." or "I see." Words like these, coupled with a caring attitude, are invitations to a child to explore her own thoughts and feelings, and possibly come up with her own solutions.
3. **Instead of denying the feeling, give the feeling a name.** The child who hears the words for what he is experiencing is deeply comforted. Someone has acknowledged his inner experience. ("That sounds frustrating!")
4. **Instead of explanation and logic, give a child his wishes in fantasy.** When children want something they can't have, adults usually respond with logical explanations of why they can't have it. Often the harder we explain, the harder they protest. Sometimes just having some-one understand how much you want something makes reality easier to bear. ("I wish I could make the banana ripe for you right now!")

So there you have it — four possible ways to give first aid to a child in distress: by listening with full attention, by acknowledging his feelings with a word, by giving a name to his feelings, by granting him his wishes in fantasy.

But more important than any words we use is our attitude. If our attitude is not one of compassion, then whatever we say will be experienced by the child as phony or manipulative. It is when our words are infused with our real feelings of empathy that they speak directly to a child's heart.

Cautions

- ➔ Children usually object when their exact words are repeated back to them.
- ➔ There are youngsters who prefer not talk at all when they're upset. For them, Mom or Dad's presence is comfort enough.
- ➔ Some children become irritated when they express an intense emotion and their parent's response is "correct," but cool.
- ➔ It's also not helpful when parents respond with more intensity than the child feels.
- ➔ Children don't appreciate having the names they call themselves repeated by their parents.

It's probably obvious to you by now that dealing with feelings is an art, not a science. Yet we have faith (based upon years of observation) that parents, after some trial and error, can master the art. You'll sense after a while what is helpful to your individual child and what isn't. With practice you'll soon discover what irritates and what comforts; what creates distance and what invites intimacy; what wounds and what heals. There is no substitute for your own sensitivity.



Chapter 2: Engaging Cooperation

One of the built-in frustrations of parenthood is the daily struggle to get our children to behave in ways that are acceptable to us and to society. Part of the problem lies in the conflict of needs. The adult need is for some semblance of cleanliness, order, courtesy, and routine. The children couldn't care less. A lot of parental passion goes into helping children adjust to societal norms. And somehow the more intense we become, the more actively they resist.

Some of the methods most commonly used by adult to get children to cooperate are:

- ✓ Blaming and Accusing — “Your dirty fingerprints are on the door again! Why do you always do that?”
- ✓ Name-calling — “You have to be a slob to keep such a filthy room. You live like an animal.”
- ✓ Threats — “If you don't spit that gum out this minute, I'm going to open your mouth and take it out.”
- ✓ Commands — “I want you to clean up your room right this minute.”
- ✓ Lecturing and Moralizing — “Do you think that was a nice thing to do — to grab that book from me? I can see you don't realize how important good manners are. What you have to understand is that if we expect people to be polite to us, then we must be polite to them in return.”
- ✓ Warnings — “Careful, you'll get hit by a car!”
- ✓ Martyrdom Statement — What 'til you have children of your own. Then you'll know what aggravation is.”

- ✓ Comparisons — “Lisa has such beautiful table manners. You'd never catch her eating with her fingers.”
- ✓ Sarcasm — “Is this the homework you're bringing to school tomorrow? Well maybe your teacher can read Chinese; I can't.”
- ✓ Prophecy — “Just keep on being selfish. You'll see, no one is ever going to want to play with you. You'll have no friends.”

Are there ways to engage our children's cooperation without doing violence to their self-esteem or leaving them with such a backwash of bad feelings?

We'd like to share with you five skills that have been helpful to us and to the parents in our workshops. Not every one of them will work with every child. Not every skill will suit your personality. And there isn't any one of them that is effective all the time. What these five skills do, however, is create a climate of respect in which the spirit of cooperation can begin to grow.

1. **Describe.** Describe what you see, or describe the problem. It's hard to do what needs to be done when people are telling you what's wrong with you. It's easier to concentrate on the problem when someone just describes it to you. (“There's a wet towel on the bed.”)
2. **Give information.** Information is a lot easier to take than accusation. When children are given information, they can usually figure out for themselves what needs to be done. (“The towel is getting my blanket wet.”)
3. **Say it with a word.** Children dislike hearing lectures, sermons, and long explanations. For them, the shorter the reminder, the better. (“The towel!”)



4. **Talk about your feelings.** Make no comment about the child's character or personality. By describing what we feel, we can be genuine without being hurtful. ("I don't like sleeping in a wet bed!")
5. **Write a note.** Sometimes nothing we say is as effective as a written word. ("Please put me back so I can dry. Thanks! Your Towel.")

Cautions

- ➔ Describe — It is possible to use this skill in a way that can be irritating.
- ➔ Give Information — Refrain from giving the child information she already knows.
- ➔ The One-Word Statement — Don't use your child's name as your one-word statement.
- ➔ Describe What you Feel — Some children are very sensitive to their parents' disapproval. For those children it's best just to state your expectations.

Our purpose is to speak to what is best in our children — their intelligence, their initiative, their sense of responsibility, their sense of humor, their ability to be sensitive to the needs of others. We want to put an end to talk that wounds the spirit, and search out the language that nourishes self-esteem. We want to create an emotional climate that encourages children to cooperate because they care about themselves, and because they care about us. We want to demonstrate the kind of respectful communication that we hope our children will use with us — now, during their adolescent years, and ultimately as our adult friends.

Chapter 3: Alternatives to Punishment

To punish or not to punish?

What could I do instead?

1. **Express your feelings strongly — without attacking character** ("I'm furious that my new saw was left outside to rust in the rain!")
2. **State your expectations.** ("I expect my tools to be returned after they've been borrowed.")
3. **Show the child how to make amends.** ("What this saw needs now is a little steel wool and a lot of elbow grease.")
4. **Give the child a choice.** ("You can borrow my tools and return them, or you can give up the privilege of using them. You decide.")
5. **Take action.** (Child: "Why is the tool box locked?" Father: "You tell me why.")
6. **Problem-solve.** ("What can we work out so that you can use my tools when you need them, and so that I'll be sure they're there when I need them?") To problem-solve:
 - ✓ Talk about the child's feelings and needs.
 - ✓ Talk about your feelings and needs.
 - ✓ Brainstorm together to find a mutually agreeable solution.
 - ✓ Write down all ideas—without evaluating.
 - ✓ Decide which suggestions you like, which you don't like, and which you plan to follow through on.

We are teaching our children that they needn't be our victims or our enemies. We are giving them the tools that will enable them to be active participants in solving the problems that confront them — now, while they're at home, and in the difficult, complex world that awaits them.



Cautions about Problem-Solving

- ➔ Talk about the child's feelings. Don't rush this part. Let your attitude be "I'm really trying to get clear on how you feel about all this." Only when the child feels heard and understood will she be able to consider your feelings.
- ➔ Talk about your feelings. Keep this part short and clear. It's hard for a child to listen to a parent who goes on and on about his worry, his anger, or his resentment.
- ➔ Invite the child to work on finding a mutually acceptable solution. If possible, let the child come up with the first few ideas. The crucial point here is to refrain from evaluating or commenting on any of those ideas. All ideas should be welcomed.
- ➔ Decide which ideas you like, which you don't, and which ideas you want to put into action. Watch out for "put-down" statements ("That's a dumb idea"). Instead describe your personal reactions: "I wouldn't be comfortable with that because..."
- ➔ Follow through. The danger here is getting so carried away with your good feelings at having come up with a workable solution that you don't bother to make a specific plan to follow through.
- ➔ Don't permit the child to blame or accuse you at any point. It's important that the parent be firm when this happens.

Chapter 4: Encouraging Autonomy

Most of the books on child-rearing tell us that one of our important goals as parents is to help our children separate from us, to help them become independent individuals who will one day be able to function on their own without us. We're urged not to think of our children as little carbon copies of us or extensions of ourselves but as unique human beings with different temperaments different tastes, different feelings, different desires, different dreams.

Yet, how are we to help them become separate, independent persons? By allowing them to do things for themselves, by permitting them to wrestle with their own problems, by letting them learn from their own mistakes.

Fortunately the opportunities to encourage our children's autonomy present themselves everyday. Here are some specific skills that can help children to rely on themselves rather than upon us.

1. **Let children make choices.** It must be very hard to be an adult who is forced to make decisions about career, lifestyle, mate without having had a good deal of experience in exercising your own judgment. ("Are you in the mood for your grey pants today, or your red pants?")
2. **Show respect for a child's struggle.** When a child's struggle is respected, he gathers courage to see a job through himself. ("A jar can be hard to open. Sometimes it helps if you tap the side of the lid with a spoon.")
3. **Don't ask too many questions.** Too many questions can be experienced as an invasion of one's private life. Children will talk about what they want to talk about when they want to talk about it. ("Glad so see you. Welcome home.")



4. *Don't rush to answer questions.* When children ask questions, they deserve the chance to explore the answer for themselves first. ("That's an interesting question. What do you think?")
5. *Encourage children to use sources outside the home.* We want our children to know that they're not completely dependent upon us. The world outside the home — the pet shop, the dentist, the school, an older child — can all be called upon to help them with their problems. ("Maybe the pet shop owner would have a suggestion.")
6. *Don't take away hope.* By trying to protect children from disappointment, we protect them from hoping, striving, dreaming, and sometimes from achieving their dreams. ("So you're thinking of trying out for the play! That should be an experience.")

The fact is, this whole business of encouraging autonomy can be quite complicated. As much as we understand the importance of our children being independent, there are forces within us that work against it.

- ✓ First, there's the matter of sheer convenience. Most of us today are busy and in a hurry. We usually wake the children ourselves, button their buttons, tell them what to eat and what to wear, because it seems so much easier and faster to do it for them.
- ✓ Then we have to cope with our strong feelings of connectedness to our children. We have to fight against seeing their failures as our failures.
- ✓ It also takes great restraint and self-discipline on our part not to move in with advice, particularly when we're sure we have the answer.

- ✓ But there's something even larger that interferes with our rational desire to help our children separate from us. I remember so well the deep satisfaction that came from being so totally needed by three small human beings.

It's a bittersweet road we parents travel. We start with total commitment to a small, helpless human being. Over the years we worry, plan, comfort, and try to understand. We give our love, our labor, our knowledge and our experience—so that one day he or she will have the inner strength and confidence to leave us.

Chapter 5: Praise

Granted, there are children who manage to brush off the belittling they get at home and still rise to the challenges of the outside world. And granted, there are some children who are treated with regard at home who still doubt their own abilities and shrink from challenge. However, it would seem logical that those children who grow up in families where their best is appreciated would be more likely to feel good about themselves, more likely to cope with the challenges of life, and more likely to set higher goals for themselves than those who don't.

If a child's self-esteem is so important, then what can we as parents do to enhance it? Certainly all the principles and skills we've talked about so far can help a child see himself as a person of worth. Each time we show respect for his feelings, each time we offer him a chance to make a choice, or give him a chance to solve a problem, he grows in confidence and self-esteem.

Surely praising them would seem to be another part of the answer. But praise can be tricky business. Sometimes the most well-meant praise brings about unexpected reactions.



You've probably discovered for yourself some of the built-in problems of praise. Along with some good feelings can come other reactions:

- ✓ Praise can make you doubt the praiser. ("If she thinks I'm a good cook, she's either lying or knows nothing about good food.")
- ✓ Praise can lead to immediate denial. ("Always beautifully dressed! ... You should have seen me an hour ago.")
- ✓ Praise can be threatening. ("But how will I look at the next meeting?")
- ✓ Praise can force you to focus on your weaknesses. ("Brilliant mind? Are you kidding? I still can't add a column of figures.")
- ✓ Praise can create anxiety and interfere with activity. ("I'll never be able to hit the ball like that again. Now I'm really uptight.")
- ✓ Praise can also be experienced as manipulation. ("What does this person want from me?")

Instead of evaluating, describe.

1. **Describe what you see.** ("I see a clean floor, a smooth bed, and books neatly lined up on the shelf.")
2. **Describe what you feel.** ("It's a pleasure to walk into this room!")
3. **Sum up the child's praiseworthy behavior with a word.** ("You sorted out your pencils, crayons and pens, and put them in separate boxes. That's what I call *organization!*")

Most of us are quick to criticize and slow to praise. We have a responsibility as parents to reverse this order. Our children's self-esteem is too valuable to be left to chance or entrusted to strangers.

Let us realize that along with food, shelter, and clothing, we have another obligation to our children, and that is to affirm their "rightness." The whole world will tell them what's wrong with them — loud and often. Our job is to let our children know what's right about them.

Cautions

- ➔ Make sure your praise is appropriate to your child's age and level of ability.
- ➔ Avoid the kind of praise that hints at past weaknesses or past failures.
- ➔ Be aware that excessive enthusiasm can interfere with a child's desire to accomplish for herself.
- ➔ Be prepared for a lot of repetition of the same activity when you describe what a child is doing appreciatively.

Chapter 6: Freeing Children from Playing Roles

Sometimes it takes no more than a few words, a look, or a tone of voice to tell you that you're either "slow or stupid," "a pest," or a basically likable and capable person. How your parents think of you can often be communicated in seconds. When you multiply those seconds by the hours of daily contact between parents and children, you begin to realize how powerfully young people can be influenced by the way their parents view them. Not only are their feelings about themselves affected, but so is their behavior.



When a child persistently behaves in any one way over a period of time, it requires great restraint on our part not to reinforce the negative behavior by shouting, “There you go again!” It takes an act of will to put aside the time to deliberately plan a campaign that will free a child from the role he’s been playing.

To free children from playing roles:

1. **Look for opportunities to show the child a new picture of himself or herself.** (“You’ve had that toy since you were three and it almost looks like new!”)
2. **Put children in situations where they can see themselves differently.** (“Sara, would you take the screwdriver and tighten the pulls on these drawers?”)
3. **Let children overhear you say something positive about them.** (“He held his arm steady even though the shot hurt.”)
4. **Model the behavior you’d like to see.** (“It’s hard to lose, but I’ll try to be a sport about it. Congratulations!”)
5. **Be a storehouse for your child’s special moments.** (“I remember the time you...”)
6. **When your child acts according to the old label, state your feelings and/or your expectations.** (“I don’t like that. Despite your strong feelings, I expect sportsmanship from you.”)

Chapter 7: Putting It All Together

The real-life dramas that children engage us in every day don’t give us time for rehearsal or careful thought. However, with your new guidelines, though we may do and say things we regret, we have a very clear direction to which we can return. There are basic principles we can depend upon. We know that we can’t go too far wrong if we take time to listen to our children’s feelings; or talk about our own feelings; or work in terms of future solutions, rather than past blame.

One final thought: Let’s not cast ourselves in roles either — good parent, bad parent, permissive parent, authoritarian parent. Let’s start thinking of ourselves as human beings first, with great potential for growth and change. The process of living or working with children is demanding and exhausting. It requires heart, intelligence, and stamina. When we don’t live up to our own expectations — and we won’t always — let’s be as kind to ourselves as we are to our youngsters. If our children deserve a thousand chances, and then one more, let’s give ourselves a thousand chances — and then two more.

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