How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk

By: Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

The following is a summary of the key points offered by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish in the above titled book. It may be helpful to read the entire book for more examples and clarification.

Parents often automatically deny their child’s feelings by saying something like “Oh, you don’t really feel that way”, “You can’t be tired, you just had a nap”, or “You’re not hot! It’s cold; wear a sweater”. This can confuse and enrage kids, teaching them that they do not know what they are feeling, and not to trust themselves. You can put yourself in your child’s shoes by asking yourself “What if I was a child who was tired, hot, angry, etc, and I wanted an important adult in my life to know how I felt?”

To Help Children Deal with Their Feelings:

1. Listen quietly and with your full attention
2. Acknowledge the child’s feelings with a word such as “oh”, “hmm”, or “I see”
3. Give the feeling a name: “That sounds frustrating” or “You sound really angry”
4. Give the child her wishes in a fantasy: “I wish I had 100 cookies to give you!”

Children need to have their feelings accepted, respected, and acknowledged—not agreed with. A few words of acceptance can soothe feelings and dramatically change your child’s mood.

The attitude in which you talk to your children is as important as the words used. They need a compassionate attitude that conveys “You are a loving and capable person”.

Hold off on giving advice, as this deprives children of the experience of developing their own solutions.

All *feelings* can be accepted. It is certain *actions* that must be limited. Being permissive of feelings is not the same as being permissive of actions: “I can see you are really mad at your brother, but tell him with your words, not your fists.”

Negative emotions are more tempting for parents to deny or ignore.

Sometimes it may be helpful for your child if you identify that he may have 2 or more different feelings about the same situation: “It seems to me that you have 2 different feelings about going away to camp. You are excited to see your friends, but you are scared to be away that long.”

Many children cannot explain “why” they feel a certain way. They may find it more helpful to hear “I see that you are angry” rather than “Why are you angry? What happened?”
If you simply say “I understand how you feel” your child may not believe you, but if you say “I know that the first day of school can be scary” she will know you do understand.

If your child says something like “I hate you” that upsets you, you can say something like “I don’t like what I just heard. I know you are angry at me, but you need to tell me in another way”.

For some children, physical activity such as punching a pillow, running circles, or scribbling may help ease intense emotions.

If you make a mistake when dealing with your child’s emotions, go back and try again. If you incorrectly identify your child’s feeling, she will correct you.

*Cautions:*
- Children usually do not like their exact words to be repeated back to them.
- If your child prefers not to take while she’s upset just sit with her.
- Most children want a response from their parent that feels “real”, like their parent is in the moment with them.
- It is not helpful to respond with more intensity than the child feels.
- Don’t repeat the names children may call themselves. Instead of “You’re not stupid” say something like “It can be discouraging when you don’t get the grade you wanted.”

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*Ways parents may try to get their children to cooperate:*

1. Blaming and accusing: “Why did you get your pants dirty again? You always do that. What’s wrong with you?”
2. Name calling: “Look at this messy room. You are such a slob.”
3. Threats: “If you do that one more time, you’ll never see that ball again.”
4. Commands: “You still didn’t put your backpack away. Do it now! Move!”
5. Lecturing and moralizing: “Teasing Sara was not a nice thing to do. Is that how you’d like to be treated?”
6. Warnings: “Careful, or you’ll fall and crack your head open!”
7. Martyrdom statements: “Do you see all my gray hairs? They are because of you two fighting all the time!”
8. Comparisons: “Lisa’s son is so well-behaved. Why can’t you act more like that?”
9. Sarcasm: “You expect to get an A with that poor work?”
10. Prophecy: “Just keep on being selfish. No one will ever want to play with you and you’ll grow up with no friends.”

Sometimes hurtful words linger and children use them on themselves later. Think of the reaction you may have to these types of statements if you were a child.

**To get your child to cooperate without damaging her self-esteem:**

1. Give information: “the towel is getting the rug wet” or “wet rugs can mold”. This provides the child with knowledge for the rest of his life, and instills the message that “grown-ups trust me with responsibility once I know the facts”.
2. Say it with a word: “The towel!” or “the light!” Rather then being seen as an
oppressive command, this gives the child the opportunity to use his/her own initiative and intelligence to figure out what needs to be done.

3. Describe what you feel: “I don’t like walking on a wet floor” or “I don’t like picking up towels I did not use”. Children are capable of dealing with appropriate statements of their parents’ feelings. Children whose feelings are respected will most likely respect their parents’ feelings. If not, explain that you care about how you feel, and you care about how they feel.

4. Write a note: “Please hang me here when finished so I can dry, your wet towel” (above towel rack). Both young and older children like to receive notes and they are a quick method for parents to reach their children.

It is appropriate to ask a child to “please” do something in relaxed moments, such as when passing the salt at dinner, but when parents are upset, “please” may make the situation more intense, and speaking forcefully rather than pleading with your child may work more efficiently.

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If your child does not respond to you or you cannot seem to get through, think about the following:

1. Is the request appropriate for your child’s age and ability?
2. Does your child feel the request is unreasonable? (why do I need to wash behind my ears where no one sees?)
3. Can you give her a choice about when or how to do something? (before your bath or after, eat on the red plate or the blue plate)
4. Are there physical changes in the environment that could be made to make things easier for you child, such as lower coat hangers, more closet shelves?
5. Are you taking time to spend time with you child, or is most of your time spent asking him to do things?

If your child has had heavy doses of criticism in the past is now hypersensitive, it may time having many things overlooked and receiving much approval before it will work to have her hear the slightest bit of disapproval. Eventually most children respond to the respectful methods mentioned.

If it works to use humor with your children, do so!

Before repeating yourself a second or third time, find out if your child has heard you.

If your child often says she will help “later” and does not follow through, work with the child to plan exactly when she will complete the task. The conversation could go like this: “It would help me to know when you plan to mow the lawn.” “After this show.” “When is that?” “An hour.” “Ok, good. I know the lawn will be mowed at 5pm.”

Cautions:
-Describing what you see is only helpful when it is not irritating, and the child feels his help is genuinely needed.
-Refrain from giving the child information she already knows.
-Do not use your child’s name as a one word statement. The child may begin to associate his name with disapproval.

-For children who are very sensitive to their parents’ disapproval, a statement of expectations is best. Instead of “I am very angry that you pulled the cat’s tail” you may say “I expect you to be kind to animals”.

-Even if these skills are always followed correctly, your children will not always respond. They are not robots, and we are trying to speak to their intelligence rather than manipulate them.

Alternatives to punishment:

1. Point out a way to be helpful
2. Express strong disapproval (without attacking character)
3. State your expectations
4. Show the child how to make amends. This helps the child restore his good feelings about himself after the remorse of behaving badly
5. Give a choice
6. Take action
7. Allow the child to experience the consequences of his behavior
8. Problem Solve

Punishment does not work because it is a distraction. Discipline means education! It requires mutual respect and trust. Punishment requires external control, coercion, or force.

When a problem persists after using alternatives to punishment, it is usually more complex than it originally appeared.

To problems solve:

1. Talk about the child’s feelings and needs
2. Talk about your feelings and needs
3. Brainstorm together to find a mutually agreeable solution
4. Write down all ideas, without evaluating whether they are “good” or “bad”
5. Decide which suggestions you like, don’t like, and which you plan to follow through on

This process gives children the tools that will enable them to be active participants in solving problems that confront them

To prepare for the problem solving process, remember these points:

-Be accepting of your child and listen for feelings and ideas you may not have heard before
-Don’t be restricted by time; you may need to finish later
-Consider new ideas
-Do not evaluate, judge, lecture, persuade, or convince your child to see things your way
-Remember to follow through on all of your hard work
-Do not let your child blame or accuse you at any point. State firmly that there is not accusation or discussion about the past, and the goal is to focus on a solution for the future.

It is important for children to develop into responsible, independent beings.

**To encourage autonomy:**

1. Let your children make choices. If you can offer a choice about when or how to do something, the child may have less resentment.
2. Show respect for a child’s struggle. It is not helpful for you to say to your child that something is easy because if he succeeds, he has succeeded at an “easy” task. If he fails, he has failed at something easy. It is more helpful to suggest that “this can be hard” or that “sometimes it’s helpful if…”.
3. Don’t ask too many questions. Your child may offer more information if you let him open up without bombarding him with questions.
4. Don’t rush to answer questions. If you do this, you are doing the mental exercise for the child. Children often ask questions as permission to explore a topic, not for an immediate answer.
5. Encourage children to use a source outside the home to find information. It is helpful for children to learn that there are resources outside the home, and how to find and access them.
6. Don’t take away hope. Much of the pleasure of life is dreaming, fantasizing, and hoping, so taking away the risk of disappointment by eliminating a child’s dream is not always beneficial.
7. Let him own his own body.
8. Don’t talk about your child in front of her, as if she is not there.
9. Let your child answer for herself.
10. Watch out for too many “No’s”. Instead of “no”, sometimes give information, accept feelings, describe the problem, say yes if possible, or give yourself time to think.

Praise raises a child’s self-esteem, and a child needs a lot of sincere praise to counterbalance conflict or criticism. It is important to use descriptive praise so your child knows exactly what you are happy with. An example of non-descriptive praise would be saying “Your painting is beautiful”. An example of descriptive praise would be “I really love how you used several colors to paint to leaves on the tree”. Descriptive praise can help a child learn something new about herself, or aspects of herself that are valued. Praise becomes a life long touchstone that a child can return to in times of self-doubt and discouragement.

**Instead of evaluating, describe:**

1. Describe what you see
2. Describe what you feel
3. Sum up the child’s praiseworthy behavior in a word
Cautions:
- Make praise age appropriate
- Do not hint to past weaknesses or failures
- Excessive enthusiasm can be perceived as pressure
- Be prepared for a lot of repletion of the behavior you praise

It is easy to place children in roles by generalizing descriptions that may or may not have been appropriate at one moment or due to one behavior. The child may act according to the role her parents put her in by saying things such as “She is the little helper” or “She is the rebel”.

To free children from playing roles:
1. Look for opportunities to show the child a new picture of herself
2. Put your child in situations where they can see themselves differently
3. Let your child overhear you say something positive about them
4. Model the behavior you’d like to see
5. Remind your child of special moments in his life
6. When your child acts according to the old label, state your expectations

These methods take practice, but will help you raise a child who can communicate well with you and others. You will teach your child what it means to be respected and how to have respect for others. Again, please refer to the full book if you have questions or for more information.