

HOW "Will bring about more cooperation from children To Talk than all the yelling and pleading in the So Kids CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk

ADELE FABER AND ELAINE MAZLISH

Authors of LIBERATED PARENTS/ LIBERATED CHILDREN

How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk

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Illustrations by Kimberly Ann Coe



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A Letter to Readers

Dear Reader,

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. In our first book, *Liberated Parents/Liberated Children*, we tried not to teach or preach. We had a story to tell. Our years of workshops with the late child psychologist Dr. Haim Ginott had affected our lives deeply. We were sure that if we told the story of how our new skills had changed the way we treated our children, and ourselves, that our readers would catch the spirit behind the skills and be inspired to improvise on their own.

To some extent it did work that way. Many parents wrote to tell us proudly of what they had been able to accomplish in their homes just from reading about our experiences. But there were other letters, and a common appeal ran through them all. They wanted a second book—a book with "lessons" . . . "practice exercises" . . . "rules of thumb" . . . "tear-out reminder pages" . . . some kind of materials that would help them to learn the skills "step by step."

For a while we considered the idea seriously, but our initial resistance returned and we pushed the thought to the back of our minds. Besides we were too busy concentrating on the speeches and workshops we were preparing for our lecture tours.

During the next few years we traveled around the country, conducting workshops for parents, teachers, school principals,

hospital staffs, teenagers, and child-care workers. Wherever we went, people shared with us their personal experiences with these new methods of communication—their doubts, their frustrations, and their enthusiasm. We were grateful to them for their openness and we learned from them all. Our files were bulging with exciting new material.

Meanwhile the mail continued to come in, not only from the United States, but from France, Canada, Israel, New Zealand, the Philippines, India. Mrs. Anagha Ganpule from New Delhi wrote:

"There are so many problems about which I would like to take your advice. . . . Please let me know what I could do to study the subject in depth. I am at a dead end. The old ways do not suit me, and I do not have the new skills. Please help me get over this."

That was the letter that did it.

We started to think again about the possibility of writing a book that showed "how." 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 that would give parents a chance to practice what they've learned at their own pace—either by themselves or with a friend?

Why not a book with hundreds of examples of helpful dialogues so that parents could adapt this new language to their own personal style?

The book could have cartoons that would show the skills in action, so that a harried parent could glance at a picture and give himself or herself a quick refresher course.

We'd personalize the book. We'd talk about our own experiences, answer the most commonly asked questions, and include the stories and new insights that parents in our groups have shared with us over the past six years. But, most important, we'd always keep sight of our larger goal—the constant search for methods that affirm the dignity and humanity of both parents and children.

Suddenly our original uneasiness about writing a "how to" book vanished. Every other art or 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?

Once we decided, we started writing rapidly. We hope to get a complimentary copy off to Mrs. Ganpule in New Delhi before her children are grown.

> Adele Faber Elaine Mazlish

How to Read and Use This Book

It seems presumptuous for us to be telling anyone else how to read a book (particularly when both of us have been known to start books in the middle or even read them backwards). But since this is our book, we'd like to tell you how we think it should be tackled. After you've gotten the feel of it by flipping through and glancing at the cartoons, start with Chapter I. Actually do the exercises as you go along. Resist the temptation to skip over them and get to the "good parts." If you have a compatible friend with whom to work on the exercises, so much the better. We hope you'll talk and argue and discuss your answers at length.

We also hope you'll write your answers down so that this book becomes a personal record for you. Write neatly or illegibly; change your mind and cross out or erase; but do write.

Read the book slowly. It took us more than ten years to learn the ideas in it. We don't suggest that you take that long to read it; but if the methods suggested here make sense to you, you might want to make some changes, and it's easier to change a little at a time than all at once. After you've read a chapter, lay the book aside, and give yourself a week to do the assignment before going on. (You may be thinking, "With everything else I have to do, the last thing I need is an assignment!" Nevertheless, experience tells us that the discipline of having to put skills into action and record the results helps put the skills where they belong—inside you.)

Finally, a word about pronouns. We've tried to avoid the awkward "he/she, him/her, himself/herself" by loosely alter-

nating between our use of male and female gender. We hope we haven't slighted either sex.

You may also wonder why some portions of this book, which is written by two people, are told from the point of view of one person. It was our way of solving the bothersome problem of constantly having to identify who was speaking about whose experience. It seemed to us that "I" would be easier for our readers than a constant repetition of "I, Adele Faber . . ." or "I, Elaine Mazlish. . . ." As for our conviction of the value of the ideas in this book, we speak in unison. We have both seen these methods of communication at work with our own families and with thousands of others. It is a great pleasure for us to share them with you now.

"All we are given is possibilities to make ourselves one thing or another." JOSE ORTEGA Y GASSET

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Helping Children Deal with Their Feelings

PART I

I was a wonderful parent before I had children. I was an expert on why everyone else was having problems with theirs. Then I had three of my own.

Living with real children can be humbling. Every morning I would tell myself, "Today is going to be different," and every morning was a variation of the one before. "You gave her more than me!" . . . "That's the pink cup. I want the blue cup." . . . "This oatmeal looks like 'throw-up.'" . . . "He punched me." . . . "I never touched him!" . . . "I won't go to my room. You're not the boss over me!"

They finally wore me down. And though it was the last thing I ever dreamed I'd be doing, I joined a parent group. The group met at a local child guidance center and was led by a young psychologist, Dr. Haim Ginott.

The meeting was intriguing. The subject was "children's feelings," and the two hours sped by. I came home with a head spinning with new thoughts and a notebook full of undigested ideas:

Direct connection between how kids feel and how they behave.

When kids feel right, they'll behave right.

How do we help them to feel right?

By accepting their feelings!

Problem—Parents don't usually accept their children's feelings; for example:

"You don't really feel that way."

"You're just saying that because you're tired."

"There's no reason to be so upset."

Steady denial of feelings can confuse and enrage kids. Also teaches them not to know what their feelings are—not to trust them.

After the session I remember thinking, "Maybe other parents do that. I don't." Then I started listening to myself. Here are some sample conversations from my home—just from a single day.

CHILD: Mommy, I'm tired.

ме: You couldn't be tired. You just napped.

CHILD: (louder) But I'm tired.

ME: You're not tired. You're just a little sleepy. Let's get dressed.

CHILD: (wailing) No, I'm tired!

CHILD: Mommy, it's hot in here.

ме: It's cold. Keep your sweater on.

CHILD: No, I'm hot.

ME: I said, "Keep your sweater on!"

CHILD: No, I'm hot.

CHILD: That TV show was boring.

ME: No it wasn't. It was very interesting.

CHILD: It was stupid.

ME: It was educational.

CHILD: It stunk.

ME: Don't talk that way!

Can you see what was happening? Not only were all our conversations turning into arguments, I was also telling my children over and over again not to trust their own perceptions, but to rely upon mine instead.

Once I was aware of what I was doing. I was determined to change. But I wasn't sure of how to go about it. What finally helped me most was actually putting myself in my children's shoes. I asked myself, "Suppose I were a child who was tired, or hot or bored? And suppose I wanted that all-important grown-up in my life to know what I was feeling . . . ?"

Over the next weeks I tried to tune in to what I felt my children might be experiencing; and when I did, my words seemed to follow naturally. I wasn't just using a technique. I really meant it when I said, "So you're still feeling tired—even though you just napped." Or "I'm cold, but for you it's hot in here." Or "I can see you didn't care much for that show." After all we were two separate people, capable of having two different sets of feelings. Neither of us was right or wrong. We each felt what we felt.

For a while my new skill was a big help. There was a noticeable reduction in the number of arguments between the children and me. Then one day my daughter announced, "I hate Grandma," and it was my mother she was talking about. I never hesitated for a second. "That is a terrible thing to say," I snapped. "You know you don't mean it. I don't ever want to hear that coming out of your mouth again."

That little exchange taught me something else about myself. I could be very accepting about most of the feelings the children had, but let one of them tell me something that made me angry or anxious and I'd instantly revert to my old way.

I've since learned that my reaction was not that unusual. On the following page you'll find examples of other statements children make that often lead to an automatic denial from their parents. Please read each statement and jot down what you think a parent might say if he were denying his child's feelings.

I.	CHILD: I don't like the new baby. PARENT: (denying the feeling)
II.	CHILD: I had a dumb birthday party. (After you went "allout" to make it a wonderful day.) PARENT: (denying the feeling)
III.	CHILD: I'm not wearing my bite-plate anymore. It hurts. I don't care what the orthodontist says! PARENT: (denying the feeling)
IV.	CHILD: I'm so mad! Just because I was two minutes late for gym, the teacher kicked me off the team. PARENT: (denying the feeling)

 $Did \ you \ find \ yourself \ writing \ things \ like:$

"That's not so. I know in your heart you really love the baby."

"What are you talking about? You had a wonderful party—ice cream, birthday cake, balloons. Well, that's the last party you'll ever have!"

"Your bite-plate can't hurt that much. After all the money we've invested in your mouth, you'll wear that thing whether you like it or not!"

"You have no right to be mad at the teacher. It's your fault. You should have been on time."

Somehow this kind of talk comes easily to many of us. But how do children feel when they hear it? In order to get a sense of what it's like to have one's feelings disregarded, try the following exercise:

Imagine that you're at work. Your employer asks you to do an extra job for him. He wants it ready by the end of the day. You mean to take care of it immediately, but because of a series of emergencies that come up, you completely forget. Things are so hectic, you barely have time for your own lunch.

As you and a few co-workers are getting ready to go home, your boss comes over to you and asks for the finished piece of work. Quickly you try to explain how unusually busy you were today.

He interrupts you. In a loud, angry voice he shouts, "I'm not interested in your excuses! What the hell do you think I'm paying you for—to sit around all day on your butt?" As you open your mouth to speak, he says, "Save it," and walks off to the elevator.

Your co-workers pretend not to have heard. You finish gathering your things and leave the office. On the way home you meet a friend. You're still so upset that you find yourself telling him or her what had just taken place.

Your friend tries to "help" you in eight different ways. As you read each response, tune in to your immediate "gut" reaction and then write it down. (There are no right or wrong reactions. Whatever you feel is right for you.)

I. Denial of Feelings: "There's no reason to be so upset. It's foolish to feel that way. You're probably just tired and blowing the whole thing out of proportion. It can't be as

bad as you make it out to be. Come on, smile You look so nice when you smile."
Your reaction:
II. The Philosophical Response: "Look, life is like that. Things don't always turn out the way we want. You have to learn to take things in stride. In this world nothing is perfect."
Your reaction:
III. Advice: "You know what I think you should do? Tomorrow morning go straight to your boss's office and say, 'Look, I was wrong.' Then sit right down and finish that piece of work you neglected today. Don't get trapped by those little emergencies that come up. And if you're smart and you want to keep that job of yours, you'll make sure nothing like that ever happens again." Your reaction:

IV. Questions: "What exactly were those emergencies you had that would cause you to forget a special request from your boss?"

"Didn't you realize he'd be angry if you didn't get to it immediately?"