

HOW TO TALK SO KIDS WILL LISTEN & LISTEN SO KIDS WILL TALK

ADELE FABER & ELAINE MAZLISH



READINGGRAPHICS
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The Big “So What”

Parenting can be one of the most challenging yet fulfilling skills to master. In this book, parenting experts Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish present a down-to-earth, respectful approach to parenting, with useful steps and techniques that you can apply to improve and enrich your relationship with your child.



Introduction

This book, first published in 1980, is based on the child-rearing philosophy of Dr. Haim Ginott. This 30th anniversary edition incorporates additional insights, tips and exercises which the authors have been using in their workshops over the years. This practical guidebook equips you with 6 essential skillsets for interacting effectively with children of all ages.

A parent-child relationship is extremely personal, and there's no fixed or “right” way to communicate with your child. The authors recommend that you do the exercises in the book, record your responses and personalize the approach to suit you and your child's nature, needs and relationship.



Communicating Effectively with Children



1. Help children to deal with their feelings



When children say things that make us angry, anxious or uncomfortable, we tend to deny those feelings or try to

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fix the issue. If your child says, “Daddy, I’m hungry”, you may insist “No you’re not, you just had lunch.” Or, you may offer an immediate solution: “If you’re hungry then get something to eat.”

- Pause and consider how you’re likely to respond if your child says, “I hate the new baby”, “Grandma is so stupid” or “My birthday party sucked!” Do you reject your child’s sentiments in some way?
- What we feel is always right for us. We feel bad when others invalidate our feelings. Imagine you had a really hectic day at work—you were fighting multiple fires, working on an urgent task from your boss, and even skipped lunch. Yet, all you got at the end of the day was a tongue-lashing for submitting your work late. How would you feel if you confided in your colleague, only to have him say, “There’s no need to be upset”?
- Some common, unhelpful responses include:
 - (i) Denial of one’s feelings, e.g. “There’s no need to be sad.”
 - (ii) Philosophical reply, e.g. “Life’s like that.”
 - (iii) Advice, e.g. “Why don’t you try this...”
 - (iv) Questions, e.g. “Why did you...”
 - (v) Defending the other party, e.g. “I can see why he responded that way...”
 - (vi) Pity, e.g. “Oh, you poor thing!”
 - (vii) Psychotherapy, e.g. “Have you considered why you...”
- When we’re upset, none of the responses above will soothe us. What we really want is empathy: someone to listen and acknowledge how we feel (“Gee, that sounded frustrating”). This helps us to open up and talk about the problem, which then allows us to start coping with the feeling and working things out on our own.
- It’s the same with children. They’re perfectly capable of helping themselves if they feel listened to and empathized with. Instead of telling your child that their perceptions are wrong (and yours are right), it helps to just

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“Neither of us was right or wrong. We each felt what we felt.”

“What people of all ages can use in a moment of distress is not agreement or disagreement; they need someone to recognize what it is they’re experiencing.”

acknowledge how they feel with statements like: “Oh, you’re still hungry even though you just had lunch” or “I see you didn’t enjoy your party”.



Here are 4 ways to help a child to deal with negative feelings:

- Listen with full attention. Look at them while they share their problem, instead of half-listening while watching TV or messaging on your phone. Sometimes, all your child needs is your full attention (even if you don’t say a word).
- Acknowledge their feelings instead of asking questions or giving advice. A child finds it hard to think if he/she feels like you’re questioning or blaming them. Use simple words like “Oh”, “Hmmm”, or “I see” to show that you’re listening. This invites the child to explore his/her thoughts and feelings to possibly arrive at a solution.
- Instead of denying their feelings (“There’s no need to be so sad”), give their feeling a name (“You seem really disappointed”).
 - (i) Acknowledging a bad feeling doesn’t make it worse; it makes the other person feel understood and comforted. On the other hand, the more you deny a feeling, the worse the other person feels.
 - (ii) When you say “I understand how you feel”, your child may not believe you. Naming the feeling removes that doubt. If you name a wrong feeling, your child can always correct you.
- When a child makes an impossible request, adults may reject it outright with logical explanations. Grant their wishes in fantasy instead, e.g. “I wish I could make it rain marshmallows right now!” Just knowing that you understand how much they want something makes the disappointment easier to bear.



Useful notes and exercises:

- Important points to note about exercising empathy:
 - (i) These techniques only work with a caring attitude and true compassion, not manipulation.

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“Sometimes a sympathetic silence is all a child needs.”

“When we urge a child to push a bad feeling away—however kindly—the child seems to get only more upset.”

“Sometimes just having someone understand how much you want something makes reality easier to bear.”

“It is when our words are infused with our real feelings of empathy that they speak directly to a child’s heart.”

- (ii) You can accept your child's feeling *and* restrict undesirable behaviors, e.g. "I can see that you're really angry with your sister. You can tell her so with words, not with fists."
- (iii) Acknowledging a feeling ("It sounds like you're really scared") isn't the same as agreeing with it ("You're absolutely right").
- (iv) If your child says something like "I hate you", it's ok to respond honestly, e.g. "I feel really hurt by what you just said. If you're angry about something, tell it to me in another way so maybe I can help."
- (v) If your child is too emotional to listen, let him/her release those feelings first through physical activity or drawing.
- (vi) It's not easy to listen or empathize, especially when you're feeling tired, angry or overwhelmed. If you've responded in an unhelpful way, you can always remedy it later, e.g. "Look, I've been thinking about what you said just now about your teacher scolding you in class. I now realize how embarrassing that must have been for you."
- You can practice this skill with various exercises:
 - (i) List down some of your child's statements and identify the feelings behind them.
 - (ii) Find a partner to role-play how to listen to and acknowledge feelings (instead of denying them, offering advice or asking questions).
 - (iii) Have a conversation with your child where you accept his/her feelings. Make notes of what happened.



2. Engage cooperation

- ✗ Children don't seem to care about "proper behavior" no matter what we say/do. The more we push, the harder they resist. On the other hand, they have no qualms about telling us loudly and incessantly when there's something they don't like.

"The adult need is for some semblance of cleanliness, order, courtesy, and routine. The children couldn't care less."

KEY QUOTES

"Kids usually let us know—loud and clear—when something is bothering them."

- Pause to put yourself in a child's shoes and consider some of the unhelpful ways that adults use to get their kids' cooperation:
 - (i) Blaming/accusing, e.g. "How many times must I tell you to...The problem with you is..."
 - (ii) Name-calling, e.g. "That's so sloppy/disgusting."
 - (iii) Threats, e.g. "If you don't do this, I will..."
 - (iv) Commands, e.g. "Hurry up and do this now!"
 - (v) Lecturing/moralizing, e.g. "Don't you know how bad it is to..."
 - (vi) Warnings, e.g. "Be careful! Watch out!"
 - (vii) Martyrdom, e.g. "Are you trying to give me a heart attack?"
 - (viii) Comparisons, e.g. "Why can't you be like so-and-so?"
 - (ix) Sarcasm, e.g. "Wow, that's *such* a smart thing to do."
 - (x) Prophecy, e.g. "You'll never amount to anything at this rate."



Use these 5 skills to encourage cooperation without negative feelings.

- Describe the problem or what you see. Instead of saying "Are you trying to flood the bathroom?" or "Turn that off, right now!", it's more helpful to say "The bathtub is almost full and the water is going to overflow." By describing the problem, you give children a chance to tell themselves what must be done.
- Provide information so they understand what should be done and why. Instead of saying "Why is the milk on the table?", explain "Milk goes bad if it isn't refrigerated" or "Walls are not for writing on. Paper is for writing on."
- Say it with 1 word instead of a long paragraph. It's easier to register the word "Shoes" than "Why do I have to keep repeating myself? I keep telling you to keep your shoes in the cabinet but do you ever listen?" However, don't use your child's name as the 1-word statement.

"Information is a lot easier to take than accusation."

- Don't attack their character, e.g. "You're acting like a spoilt brat!" Describe your feelings, e.g. "I feel irritated when I'm being yelled at. It's easier for me to listen when you ask nicely."
- Write a note. Written words can sometimes work better than verbal ones. One parent placed a note on the TV that said, "Before you turn this on, think: Have I finished my homework?" You can also get creative, e.g. "Please hang us back to dry. Signed, your towels."

Useful notes and exercises:

- Important points to note about gaining cooperation:
 - (i) Your attitude is as vital as the words you use. It's ok to express your frustration, but don't make your child feel like he's inept or irritating.
 - (ii) If your first attempt fails, try again with other skill-combinations. Seek to match your approach to the situation. If you've been harsh or critical of your child for a long time, be prepared for a longer transition period.
 - (iii) If you find yourself repeating something, stop to establish if you've been heard. e.g. "Would you tell me what I just said?" If they confirm what you said, respond simply with "Great, now that I know you heard me, I won't repeat it again."
 - (iv) If your child has the tendency to say "sure, later" without following through, clarify *when* they plan to follow through. Then, say something like: "Good, I'll count on you doing that in 2 hours. Thank you."
- You can also use these exercises to hone your responses.
 - (i) Write down a few common problems you face with your child and identify the skills to try this week.
 - (ii) Keep notes on (a) 1 unhelpful thing you didn't say this week and (b) 2 new skills you applied this week.

KEY QUOTES

"It's easier to cooperate with someone who is expressing irritation or anger, as long as you're not being attacked."

"The attitude behind your words is as important as the words themselves."

"There are many ways to match the message to the mood."



3. Use *alternatives to punishment*



If you've said/done all the "right" things and your child still won't cooperate, you might be tempted to resort to punishments. Parents punish their children because they don't want the kids to get out of hand, or they simply don't know what else to do.

- Unfortunately, punishments don't lead to real regret or repentance. The child is likely to fantasize about possible revenge, which distracts him/her from sincere reflection. Just think back on how you felt as a child when you were punished.



Let's imagine that your son keeps dashing around the supermarket despite your repeated requests for him to stop. Finally, he crashes into someone and topples the entire shopping cart. What are some alternatives to punishment you can adopt?

- Point out a way to be helpful, to re-direct his energy toward something more constructive, e.g. "It'd be helpful if you can help to choose 3 nice apples from the fruits section."
- After the incident, express strong disapproval without attacking his/her character, e.g. "I really dislike it when children run around the supermarket. It disturbs other shoppers and accidents can happen." However, always express your disapproval alongside a chance to make amends.
- State your expectations, e.g. "I expect that when I bring you out, you will be on your best behavior."
- Show the child how to make amends, e.g. "You should apologize to that lady and help to pick up the things you spilled."
- Offer a choice, e.g. "You can either walk properly or sit in the shopping cart. It's your choice."
- Take action if necessary. If the child continues to run around, then physically put him in the shopping cart.

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"By punishing a child we actually deprive him of the very important inner process of facing his own misbehavior."

- Let the child experience the consequences of his misbehavior. Punishments are about deliberate pain/deprivation to teach the child a lesson. Consequences, on the other hand, are the natural results of the child's behavior. The next time he requests to follow you to the supermarket, refuse firmly. If he asks why, say "You tell me why" to make him acknowledge the reason. Make it clear that there will be future opportunities but firmly refuse to bring him this time.
- If your child still behaves badly after you've tried the steps above, try using a problem-solving approach with the steps below. Treat your child with respect to improve your chances of success.
 - (i) Talk about the child's feelings and needs, e.g. "I imagine you must be feeling...") Genuinely seek to understand where he/she is coming from.
 - (ii) Talk about your feelings and needs ("This is how I feel about it.") Keep it short and clear; don't rant.
 - (iii) Brainstorm to find a mutually agreeable solution. Invite your child to share an idea first, and write down all the ideas without judging them. Don't allow any blaming or accusing.
 - (iv) Decide which ideas you like or dislike. Be careful not to quash your child's idea. Instead, explain your concern ("I'm not comfortable with that because...").
 - (v) Follow through on the selected idea(s). Agree on who to do what by when.



You can also try these exercises:

- Use an alternative to punishment this week and make notes of your child's reaction.
- Think of a recurring problem that may require problem-solving. Choose a time/place where you won't be interrupted, and try the steps above.



4. Encourage autonomy



One of the goals of parenting is to nurture children who are independent, responsible and competent. Yet, we're often tempted to jump in to offer advice or do things for them. Someone who's put in a dependent position may feel grateful but also frustrated, resentful and helpless.



Although it's nice to feel needed by your children, it's better to nurture independence and competence with these skills:

- Let children make their own choices, e.g. "Would you like some milk or orange juice?"
- When your child is struggling with something, resist the urge to jump in and do it for him/her. Respect your child's struggle so they're encouraged to finish the job. For example, "It can be hard to open a jar. It may help to tap on the lid with a spoon."
- Don't ask too many questions as it may feel like an invasion of privacy. Children will volunteer information when they feel like it.
- Don't rush to answer questions. Give them a chance to explore the answer themselves, e.g. "That's an interesting question. What do you think?"
- Promote resources outside the home, so children know they needn't rely only on you, e.g. "Why don't we ask your teacher for some suggestions?"
- Don't take away hope. Instead of preparing your children for disappointment, give them room to dream, fantasize, explore and experience life. Even if you don't believe your child can be a dancer, there's no harm in saying, "Oh, you want to be a dancer? Tell me more."
- You can also use these additional tips/techniques:
 - (i) Let them own their body. Don't fuss constantly over their appearance.
 - (ii) Don't micromanage their actions, e.g. correcting how they sit/talk, what they wear and how they spend their allowance.

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"Children will talk about what they want to talk about when they want to talk about it."

"The process of searching for the answer is as valuable as the answer itself."

"By trying to protect children from disappointment, we protect them from hoping, striving, dreaming, and sometimes from achieving their dreams."

(iii) Don't talk about a child in front of him—it makes him/her feel like an object. And, if someone asks a question about the child, let him/her answer the question.

(iv) Avoid the word “no” wherever possible. For example, instead of saying “No, you can't go to the playground”, try these alternatives: (a) describe the problem or give information (“We're having lunch in 5 minutes”), (b) acknowledge their feelings (e.g. “I can see you really wish to go”), (c) frame your reply with a “yes” (e.g. “Yes, you can go after lunch”), or (d) think it through (“Let me think about it”).

 When children figure out a solution/answer by themselves, they feel more confident and responsible for it. Try these exercises:

- This week, apply ≥ 2 of the skills above. Note your child's reaction.
- Consider if there's anything you've been doing for your children that they could start doing on their own. Transfer the responsibility gradually without overwhelming the child. Don't just say, “You're a big boy/girl now. It's time to start doing this on your own.”



5. Give descriptive praises



Parents play a vital role in shaping their children's self-image and esteem. Unfortunately, most parents are quick to criticize and slow to praise. Constant criticisms are obviously unhelpful. Yet, praises may also bring negative responses if the child feels undeserving of the praise, becomes anxious about future performances, or suspects that you're being insincere or manipulative.



Master the skill of descriptive praise to (i) show that you've noticed what they're doing right and (ii) help them to figure out their strengths so they can praise themselves in future. Specifically:

- Instead of sharing your evaluation (“Your painting is nice/beautiful”), describe what you see and feel (“I love the bright colors and I can almost feel the warmth of the sun!”).

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“When you consider the usual fallout from “No,” the long way is often the short way.”

“Our job is to let our children know what's right about them.”


- Sum up the praiseworthy behavior in a word, e.g. “You noticed the dishes in the sink and helped to wash them. That’s what I call taking initiative!”

Useful notes and exercises:

- Important points to note about descriptive praise:
 - (i) Match the praise with your child’s age and ability. A teenager won’t appreciate the same praise for his 3 year-old sister.
 - (ii) Don’t use praises that hint at past failures/weaknesses (e.g. “You finally passed that exam!”). Focus on their current strength (“I know you worked hard to pass this exam”).
 - (iii) Don’t be overly-enthusiastic, e.g. sing the same praise daily.
 - (iv) Your child will likely repeat the behaviors being praised, so use descriptive praise selectively.
 - (v) Instead of saying “I’m so proud of you” or “I knew you could do it” (which are statements about you), focus on *their* accomplishment, e.g. “Wow, what an achievement! You must feel so proud of yourself.”
- Try these exercises:
 - (i) Write down a quality you like about your child.
 - (ii) Write down something he/she did recently that you appreciate but didn’t acknowledge. Consider how you can show your appreciation using descriptive praise.



6. *Free children from playing roles*

 It’s common for us to label our children with terms like “playful”, “mischievous”, “stubborn”, etc. These can create a self-fulfilling prophecy when a child begins to act in accordance with our expectations. Even if you don’t say the labels out loud, your child can still perceive your thoughts/feelings through your responses, body language or tone of voice.

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“Little by little, the child who has been given the name begins to play the game.”



Use these 6 skills to liberate your child from playing out a role:

- Find opportunities to show the child a new picture of himself/herself. For example, if your “irresponsible” child voluntarily takes the dog out for a walk, point it out: “You took Rover out for his walk just as you promised. That’s taking responsibility!”
- Put them in situations where they can see themselves differently, e.g. task your “greedy” child to divide the sweets among his siblings so everyone gets a fair share.
- Let them overhear you saying something positive about them.
- Model the behavior you’d like to see, e.g. “I really dislike cleaning the storeroom, but I guess I’ll just tackle it bit by bit.”
- Be a depository for your child’s special moments, e.g. “Did Chloe call you a klutz? She definitely hasn’t seen your agile side. I remember 2 years ago when....”
- When your child behaves according to the old label, state your feelings and/or your expectations, e.g. “I dislike it when you [do this]. I expect you to [do that].”



Useful notes and exercises:

- Don’t cast yourself in roles either, i.e. don’t label yourself a good/bad parent, a permissive/authoritative parent, etc. Remember that all human beings—including you and your child—have the ability to grow and change.
- Try these exercises:
 - (i) Consider if there’s a role that your child has been cast at home, in school or by friends/relatives. Is there anything positive about that role?
 - (ii) How would you like your child to think of himself/herself?
 - (iii) How can you use each of the skills above to help your child see himself/herself differently?

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Putting It Together



Initially, you'll find yourself struggling to listen and exercise self-control. It's normal to lapse back into old habits and practices. Be patient and kind with yourself. Remember: Just being able to hear/catch yourself saying unhelpful things is in itself a crucial step toward change.



Give yourself the time and space to practice and master the skills above. You can also try to combine the skills and techniques for optimal results.



Other Details in the Book to Look out For

This is an extremely easy to read guidebook for parents. Each chapter comes with sample dialogues, cartoons, exercises, Q&As, and stories from other parents to help you to personalize your approach. For a full step-by-step guide, do get a copy of the book or visit <https://fabermazlish.com/> for more details.

About the Authors

Adele Faber (born 1928) graduated from Queens College with a B.A. in theater and drama, and earned her master's degree in education from New York University. She taught in the New York City high schools for 8 years before joining the faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York and Family Life Institute of C.W. Post College of Long Island University. She is the mother of three children.



Elaine Mazlish (1925-2017) was an American author and parent educator who specialized in helping parents and teachers to communicate better with children. Mazlish was on the faculty of the New School for Social Research and the Family Life Institute of C.W. Post. Mazlish received a degree in theater arts from

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New York University, and taught/developed drama programs for children before raising her three children full-time

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