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AdeLe Faber & ELaine MazLiSh

HOW To TALK

So KIDS Will

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KIDS Will TALK

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HOW^{TO} TALK SO KIDS ^{will} LISTEN & LiSTen SO KIDS^{will} TALK

Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish are internationally acclaimed, award-winning experts on adult-child communication. They lecture throughout the United States and the workshop programmes they have created are being used by thousands of groups around the world to improve communication between adults and children. Their books, printed in twenty languages, have sold over three million copies.

Adele and Elaine both live in Long Island, New York, and each has three adult children.

Books by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish,
available from Piccadilly Press:

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

How to Talk so Teens Will Listen, and Listen so Teens Will Talk

Siblings Without Rivalry

How to Talk so Kids Can Learn

HOW ^{TO} TALK SO KIDS ^{WILL} LISTEN & LiSTen SO KIDS ^{WILL} TALK

AdeLe Faber & ELaine MazLiSh

With a New Afterword:
The Next Generation by Joanna Faber

Illustrations by Kimberly Ann Coe

PICCADILLY PRESS • LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2001

by Piccadilly Press Ltd,

5 Castle Road, London NW1 8PR

www.piccadillypress.co.uk

This 30th anniversary edition published 2013

First edition published by Avon Books, Inc in 1982

Revised edition in 1999

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 1 84812 309 0 (paperback)

ISBN: 978 1 84812 341 0 (ebook)

1 3 5 7 9 11 13 15 17 19 20 18 16 14 12 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Cover design by Simon Davis

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Acknowledgments

To Leslie Faber and Robert Mazlish, our consultants-in-residence, who were

always there for us—with a better phrase, a new thought, a word of encouragement.

To Carl, Joanna, and Abram Faber, to Kathy, Liz, and John Mazlish, who cheered us on—just by being who they are.

To Kimberly Coe, who took our stick figures and scribbled instructions and sent us back drawings of parents and children for whom we felt immediate affection.

To Robert Markel for his support and guidance at a critical time.

To Gerard Nierenberg, friend and advisor, who gave generously of his experience and expertise.

To the parents in our workshops for their thoughtful feedback and written contributions.

To Ann Marie Geiger and Patricia King for giving of themselves unstintingly when we needed them.

To Jim Wade, our editor, whose unflagging good spirits and concern for quality made him a joy to work with.

To Dr. Haim Ginott, who introduced us to new ways of communicating

with children. When he died, the children of the world lost a great champion.

He cared so much that there be “no more scratches on their souls.”

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 both 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 backward). 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, you may 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.

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

1| 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.

ME:

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.

ME:

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 on mine instead.

Once I was aware of what I was doing, I was determined to change. But I wasn't sure 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 thought 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 "all out" to make it

a wonderful day.)

PARENT: (denying the feeling)

III. CHILD: I'm not wearing this stupid retainer anymore. It hurts. I don't care what the orthodontist says!

PARENT: (denying the feeling)

IV. CHILD: I hate that new coach! Just because I was one minute late he 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 retainer 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 coach. 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 dismissed, 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 coworkers 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 coworkers 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?”

“Has this ever happened before?”

“Why didn’t you follow him when he left the room and try to explain again?”

Your reaction:

V. Defense of the Other Person: “I can understand your boss’s reaction. He’s probably under terrible pressure. You’re lucky he doesn’t lose his temper more often.”

Your reaction:

VI. Pity: “Oh, you poor thing. That is terrible! I feel so sorry for you, I could just cry.”

Your reaction:

VII. Amateur Psychoanalysis: “Has it ever occurred to you that the real reason you’re so upset by this is because your employer represents a father figure in your life? As a child you probably worried about displeasing your father, and when your boss scolded you it brought back your early fears of rejection. Isn’t that true?”

Your reaction:

VIII. An Empathic Response (an attempt to tune into the feelings of another): “Boy, that sounds like a rough experience. To be subjected to an attack like that in front of other people, especially after having been under so much pressure, must have been pretty hard to take!”

Your reaction:

You’ve just been exploring your own reactions to some fairly typical ways that people talk. Now I’d like to share with you some of my personal

reactions. 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

makes me only feel worse than before. Pity leaves me feeling pitiful;

questions put me on the defensive; and most infuriating of all is to hear that I

have no reason to feel what I'm feeling. My overriding reaction to most of these responses is "Oh, forget it. . . . What's the point of going on?"

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.

I might even say to myself, "My boss is usually fair. . . . I suppose I should have taken care of that report immediately. . . . But I still can't overlook what

he did. . . . Well, I'll go in early tomorrow and write that report first thing in the morning. . . . But when I bring it to his office I'll let him know how upsetting it was for me to be spoken to in that way. . . . And I'll also let him know that, from now on, if he has any criticism I would appreciate being told

privately."

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

TO HELP WITH FEELINGS

1. Listen with full attention.
2. Acknowledge their feelings with a word—"Oh" . . . "Mmm" . . . "I see."
3. Give their feelings a name.
4. Give them their wishes in fantasy.

On the next few pages you'll see the contrast between these methods and the ways that people usually respond to a child who is in distress.



INSTEAD OF HALF LISTENING,

It can be discouraging to try to get through to someone who gives only lip service to listening.



I. LISTEN WITH FULL ATTENTION.

It's much easier to tell your troubles to a parent who is really listening. Sometimes a sympathetic

silence is all a child needs.



INSTEAD OF QUESTIONS AND ADVICE,

It's hard for a child to think clearly or constructively when someone is questioning, blaming, or

advising her.



II. ACKNOWLEDGE WITH A WORD—"Oh . . . mmm . . . I see."

There's a lot of help to be had from a simple "Oh . . . mmm . . ." 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.



INSTEAD OF DENYING THE FEELING,

It's strange. When we urge a child to push a bad feeling away—however kindly—the child seems to get

only more upset.



III. GIVE THE FEELING A NAME.

Parents don't usually give this kind of response, because they fear that by giving a name to the

feeling they'll make it worse. Just the opposite is true. The child who hears the words for what she is experiencing is deeply comforted. Someone has acknowledged her inner experience.



INSTEAD OF EXPLANATION AND LOGIC,

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.



IV. GIVE A CHILD HIS WISHES IN FANTASY.

Sometimes just having someone understand how much you want something makes reality easier to

bear.

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, and 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.

Of the four skills you've just seen illustrated, perhaps the most difficult is to have to listen to a child's emotional outpourings and then "give a name to the feeling." It takes practice and concentration to be able to look into and beyond what a child says in order to identify what he or she might be feeling.

Yet it's important that we give our children a vocabulary for their inner reality. Once they have the words for what they're experiencing, they can begin to help themselves.

This next exercise has a list of six statements that a child might make to her parents. Please read each statement and figure out:

1. A word or two that describe what the child might be feeling.
2. A statement you might make to the child to show you understand the feeling.

ACKNOWLEDGING FEELINGS

A word that

describes what he Use the word in a statement that

or she might be

shows you understand the feeling.

The child says.

feeling.

(Don't question or give advice.)

EXAMPLE:

That must have been

“The bus driver

embarrassing

yelled at me and

Embarrassment

(or)

everybody

Sounds as if that

laughed.”

was embarrassing

1. “I'd like to

punch that

Michael in the

nose!”

2. “Just because of _____

a little rain my

teacher said we

couldn’t go on our

field trip. She’s

dumb.”

3. “Mary invited

me to her party,

but I don't know. .

. .”

4. “I don't know

why teachers have

to load you down

with so much

homework over

the weekend!”

5. “We had

basketball practice

today and I

couldn't sink that

ball once."

6. "Janey is

moving away and

she's my best

friend."

Did you notice how much thought and effort it takes to let a child know you have a sense of what it is he or she might be feeling? For most of us it doesn't come naturally to say things like:

"Boy, you sound angry!" or

"That must have been a disappointment for you," or

"Hmm. You seem to be having some doubts about going to that party," or

“Sounds as if you really resent all that homework,” or

“Oh, that must have been so frustrating!” or

“To have a dear friend move away can be pretty upsetting.”

And yet it’s statements like these that give children comfort and free them to begin to deal with their problems. (By the way, don’t worry about using words that are too big. The easiest way to learn a new word is to hear it used in context.)

You may be thinking, “Well, in this exercise I was able to give an initial response that showed I understood—more or less. But where would the conversation go from there? How would I continue? Is it okay to give advice next?”

Hold off on giving advice. I know how tempting it is to try to solve a child’s problem with an immediate solution:

“Ma, I’m tired.”

“Then lie down and rest.”

“I’m hungry.”

“Then eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then don’t eat.”

Resist the temptation to “make better” instantly. Instead of giving advice, continue to accept and reflect on your child’s feelings.

Here’s an example of what I mean. A father in our group reported that his young son came storming into the house with the first statement you worked

on in your workbooks: “I’d like to punch that Michael in the nose!”

The father said, “Normally the conversation would have gone like this:”

SON:

I’d like to punch that Michael in the nose!

FATHER: Why? What happened?

SON:

He threw my notebook in the dirt!

FATHER: Well, did you do something to him first?

SON:

No!

FATHER: Are you sure?

SON:

I swear, I never touched him.

FATHER: Well, Michael is your friend. If you take my advice, you’ll forget about the whole thing. You’re not so perfect, you know.

Sometimes you start up and then blame someone else—the way