

Between Parent and Child. Author: Dr. Haim G. Ginott
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The Code of Communication: Parent-Child Conversations

- When children are understood, their love for the parent is deepened. A parent's sympathy serves as emotional first aid for bruised feelings.
- Most parents are unaware that it is futile to try to convince children that their complaints are unjustified, their perceptions erroneous. It only leads to arguments and angry feelings.
- Our everyday language is not adequate for communicating meaningfully with children. To reach children and to reduce parental frustration, we need to learn a caring way of conversing with them.
- Communication with children should be based on respect and on skill; it requires (a) that messages preserve the child's as well as the parent's self-respect; and (b) that statements of understanding precede statements of advice or instruction.
- *When children are in the midst of strong emotions, they cannot listen to anyone.* They cannot accept advice or consolation or constructive criticism. *They want us to understand what is going on inside them, what they are feeling at that particular moment.* Furthermore, they want to be understood without having to disclose fully what they are experiencing. It is a game in which they reveal only a little of what they feel. We have to guess the rest.
- Feelings must be dealt with before behavior can be improved.
- Unfortunately, *neither we nor our children have been brought up to share our feelings. Often, we don't even know what or how we feel.*
- *Behind many childhood questions is the desire for reassurance.* The best answer for such questions is the assurance of our abiding relationship.
- When a child comes home with a host of complaints about a friend or a teacher or about his life, it is best to respond to the feeling tone, instead of trying to ascertain facts or to verify incidents.
- *It is a deep comfort to children to discover that their feelings are a normal part of the human experience.* There is no better way to convey that than to understand them.
- It is more important for a child to *know what she feels than why she feels it.* When she knows clearly what her feelings are, she is less likely to feel "all mixed-up" inside.
- Reflecting children's feelings helps them to understand how they feel.

The Power of Words: Better Ways to Encourage and Guide

- Children need to be free from the pressure of evaluative praise so that others do not become their source of approval.
- It is not unusual for children who are praised for being smart, to become *less* likely to take on challenging learning tasks since they do not want to risk their high standing. In contrast, *when children are praised for their efforts, they become more persistent in difficult tasks.*
- Children do not like to be evaluated.
- It is important that we be positive and encouraging with children. We acknowledge effort and express appreciation ("You worked very hard on that." "Thank you for your help."), but we do not label or evaluate the child.

Self-defeating Patterns: There's No Right Way to Do a Wrong Thing

- Do it one more time then..... type warnings—fair as they may seem to adults—are worse than useless. They make sure that an obnoxious act will be repeated. *A warning serves as a challenge to the child's autonomy.* If he has any self-respect, he must transgress again, to show to himself and to others that he is not afraid to respond to a dare.
- Rewards are most helpful and more enjoyable when they are unannounced in advance, when they come as a surprise, when they represent recognition and appreciation.
- When parents must make promises to emphasize that they mean what they say, then they are as much as admitting that their “*unpromised*” word is not trustworthy. Promises build up unrealistic expectations in children.
- Bitter sarcasm and cutting clichés have no place in child upbringing.
- Often an ounce of humor is worth a ton of words.
- Why do children lie? *Sometimes they lie because they are not allowed to tell the truth.*
- Lies tell truths about fears and hopes. They reveal what one would like to be or do. To a discerning ear, lies reveal what they intend to conceal. *A mature reaction to a lie should reflect understanding of its meaning,* rather than denial of its content or condemnation of its author. *The information gained from the lie can be used to help the child to distinguish between reality and wishful thinking.*
- *In short, we do not provoke the child into defensive lying, nor do we intentionally set up opportunities for lying.* When a child does lie, our reaction should not be hysterical and moralistic, but factual and realistic.
- The rule is that *when we know the answer, we do not ask the question.* It is better to state openly, for example, “You ate the cookies when I told you not to.”
- The niceties of the art of living cannot be conveyed with a sledgehammer.

Responsibilities: Transmitting Values Rather Than Demanding Compliance

- The plain fact is that *responsibility cannot be imposed. It can only grow from within, fed and directed by values absorbed at home and in the community.* *Children's inner emotional reaction to our instruction is a decisive element in how much they learn of what we want them to know.* Values cannot be taught directly. They are absorbed, and become part of the child, only through identification with, and emulation of, persons who gain his or her love and respect. Thus, the problem of responsibility in children is referred back to the parent, or more precisely to *the parent's values as expressed in child-rearing practices that enhance loving feelings between parent and child.*
- A sense of responsibility is attained by each child through his or her own efforts and experience.
- Voice and choice.
- Children should be deliberately presented with many situations in which they make choices. The parents select the situations; the children make the choices.
- What is conveyed to the child is that she has some responsibility for her own affairs. She is not just a recipient of orders, but a participant in decisions that shape her life. From the parents' attitudes, the child should get a clear message: *We provide many options—choosing is your responsibility.*
- It's best for the child that the parent not have strong feelings about food; parents offer food of quality and taste and trust children to eat as much or as little as their own appetite demands, provided this does not conflict with medical advice. *Clearly, eating falls within the child's realm of responsibility.*

- As long as an older child chooses to use her own money, she should be allowed to buy what pleases her. If her peers make fun of her or make it clear that they find her taste “weird,” the chances are she will alter her taste to be more in line with her peers. *The parents can save themselves from criticizing, disapproving, arguing, and creating bad feelings by letting their child's classmates do the work for them.*
- From the first grade on, parents' attitudes should convey that homework is *strictly* the responsibility of the child and the teacher. Parents should not nag children about homework. Direct help may only convey to the child that he or she is helpless without parental involvement.
- Our help should be given sparingly but sympathetically. We listen rather than lecture. *We show the road but expect the traveler to reach the destination on his or her own power.*
- An allowance should not be used as a reward for good behavior or as a payment for chores. It is an educational device that has a distinct purpose: *to provide experience in the use of money by exercising choices and assuming responsibilities. Therefore, supervision of an allowance would defeat its purpose.*

Discipline: Finding Effective Alternatives to Punishment

- Physicians have a motto, “*Primum non nocere,*” which means “Above all, do no damage.” *Parents need a similar rule to help them remember that in the process of disciplining their children they do not damage their emotional well-being. The essence of discipline is finding effective alternatives to punishment.*
- Misbehavior and punishment are not opposites that cancel each other; on the contrary, they breed and reinforce each other. Punishment does not deter misconduct. It makes the offender more skillful in escaping detection. *When children are punished they resolve to be more careful, not more obedient or responsible.*
- Most parents love their children, but it is important that they not have an urgent need to be loved by them every minute of the day.
- Permissiveness is an attitude of accepting the childishness of children.
- The essence of permissiveness is the acceptance of children as persons who have a constitutional right to have all kinds of feelings and wishes.
- Over-permissiveness is the allowing of undesirable acts. Permissiveness and acceptance of all feelings bring confidence and an increasing capacity to express feelings and thoughts. Over-permissiveness brings anxiety and increasing demands for privileges that cannot be granted.
- We set limits on acts; we do not restrict wishes or feelings.
- Grant her at least in fantasy what we cannot satisfy in reality.
- *Limits are accepted more willingly when they point out the function of an object: “The chair is for sitting, not for standing”.*
- When the child is given better ways of expressing guilt and anger, and when parents learn better ways of setting and enforcing limits, the need for physical punishment is diminished.

Positive Parenting: A Day in a Child's Life

- Children who find it hard to be alert and zestful in the morning do not need ridicule.
- *When children are hurried, they take their time.* Most often they resist adults' "Hurry up!" by engaging in a slowdown. What appears as inefficiency is in reality children's very efficient weapon against the tyranny of timetables that are not theirs. Rarely should children be told to rush. Instead, they should be given *realistic time limits*, and left with the challenge to be ready on time:
- One can rest assured that *sooner or later the child will learn to keep his shoes tied, unless his peers do otherwise.*
- A realistic approach does not rely on a child's capacity to put cleanliness ahead of playfulness.
- In most situations making statements is preferable to asking questions.
- Dinner, on the other hand, should be conversation time. *The stress should be less on food and more on food for thought.*

Jealousy: The Tragic Tradition

- Jealousy, envy, and rivalry will inevitably be there.
- Nothing can change the fact that a new baby is a threat to a child's security.
- It is best that the child feel free to voice anguish to us openly, rather than languish silently.
- Neither equal punishment nor equal praise can quench the desire for exclusive love.
- Superior natural endowment may cause envy, but it is the parental overprizing of a trait or a talent that leads to relentless rivalry among children.
- Fortunately, *to protect the physical safety of the young child, we do not need to attack the emotional security of the older child.*
- Those parents who want to be absolutely fair to each child often end up being furious with all their children.
- Children do not yearn for equal shares of love: *They need to be loved uniquely, not uniformly.*

Some Sources of Anxiety in Children: Providing Emotional Safety

- A child should never be threatened with abandonment.
- To prevent unnecessary guilt, parents should deal with children's transgressions the way a good mechanic deals with a car that breaks down. He does not shame the owner; he points out what has to be repaired. *He doesn't blame the car's sounds or rattles or squeaks; he uses them for diagnostic purposes.* He asks himself, What is the probable source of the trouble?
- The best help that can be offered to them is tolerant waiting and a light comment about the difficulty of the task.
- *It is essential that a child's life not be ruled by the adult's need for efficiency.* Efficiency is the enemy of infancy. It is too costly in terms of the child's emotional economy. *It drains the child's resources, prevents growth, stifles interests, and may lead to emotional meltdowns.* Children need opportunities to experiment, struggle, and learn without being rushed or insulted.

- *Children (and adults) should not be deprived of their right to grieve and to mourn. They should be free to feel sorrow in the loss of someone loved. Children's humanity is deepened, and their character ennobled, when they can lament the end of life and love.*

General Pointers

- Love is not enough to make your child become a mensch, a human being with compassion, commitment, courage. Love is not enough. Insight is insufficient. Good parents need skill. Right skills help parents translate desired ideals into daily practices.
- To improve communication with children, we need to use language that is protective of feelings, not critical of behavior.
- Parents need to learn to respond to their children as they do to guests.
- Like surgeons, parents, too, need to learn special skills to become competent in coping with the daily demands of children. Like a trained surgeon who is careful where he cuts, parents, too, need to become skilled in the use of words. Because words are like knives. They can inflict, if not physical, many painful emotional wounds.
- These statements are preferable to such questions as "What's wrong?" "What's the matter with you?" "What happened?" *The questions convey curiosity, the statements convey sympathy.*
- Negative labeling is similar to disabling. Negative labeling that might be intended as corrective can burden the recipient for a lifetime.
- Children have more time and energy to resist us than we have to coerce them.
- A child is encouraged most when he or she knows that difficulties are understood and appreciated.
- A child feels more encouraged by sympathetic understanding of difficulties than by advice, praise, or readymade instant solutions.
- *A good parent, like a good teacher, is one who makes him or herself increasingly dispensable to children.* The parent finds satisfaction in relationships that lead children to make their own choices and to use their own powers.