

Four steps to help children deal with their feelings

“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.”

So begins the book, “How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk,” by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

Faber and Mazlish use humor with their parenting and professional experiences to help parents learn effective communication. Helping children deal with their feelings is fundamental in creating a parent/child relationship built on respect.

Respect, from the Latin *re+spectare*, means to look again or to give a second look. When we have mutual respect, we look each other in the eye again, and again and again. Respect begins with a look.

Faber and Mazlish, both students of Dr. Haim Ginott, tell us that there is a direct connection to how kids feel and how they behave.

If kids feel right, they'll act right. We can help them feel right by ac-

cepting and respecting their feelings.

It can be easy to dismiss our children's feelings. Children can be overly dramatic or use the wrong words to describe their emotions. Taken off-guard, we respond with phrases such as, “You're not hungry. You just ate,” “You're not hot. The air conditioner is running,” or “Don't say you hate your sister. That's an awful thing to say.”



Kids can become confused and angry when adults deny children's feelings. Hearing their feelings dismissed teaches our children not to trust their feelings and keeps them from learning to express them appropriately.



Maren Schmidt

Kids Talk™

Faber and Mazlish recommend four steps in accepting and respecting our children's feelings:

- **We can listen quietly and attentively.**

Turn off the television, radio, cell phone and computer, and give your child your full attention. Listen and refrain from giving advice, judging, asking questions, pitying, psychoanalyzing or taking sides. Just listen.

- **We can acknowledge our children's feelings with just a word.**

Using just a word or two, for example “oh, mmmm, I see” will help our children feel that we are hearing what they are saying and feeling. I've found nodding with steady eye contact acts as an understanding word.

- **We can give the feeling a name.**

“That sounds frustrating.” “You must be upset [angry, sad].” “You must feel happy about that.”

- **We can give the child his wishes in fantasy.**

“I wish you could wear your pajamas to school.”

A three-year-old friend of mine was upset and in tears about having to take turns on our tree swing. I listened for a while, then looked Andie in the eye and said, “I think



Strategies

you'd like to swing all day.”

She nodded.

“It's frustrating to have to take turns with your brothers.” Another nod.

“I wish I could build another swing, just for you, so you could swing and swing and swing. I'd write your name on it with pink and silver letters.”

Andie wiped her face and gave me a smile. She jumped from her mother's lap and ran to get a ball. Feelings acknowledged. Crisis over. Move on.

When we use these four steps, we'll help our children deal with their emotions. We can accept all feelings. Actions intended to harm are what we should not accept or condone.

A child might be angry and express hatred or a desire to harm. We could respond with, “I see you're upset with your brother. Use your words to tell him what you want. Remember, no hitting.”

Listen so kids will talk. Talk so kids will listen.

It's a two-way street, built on respect. Look 'em in the eyes and listen, really listen.

Kids Talk™ is an award-winning column dealing with childhood development issues written by Maren Stark Schmidt, M.Ed. She has more than 25 years experience working with young children and is the author of Understanding Montessori: A Guide for Parents. Contact her via e-mail at maren@kidstalknews.



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