

# How to Talk So Kids Can Learn

## At Home & in School

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### Chapter 1

#### How to Deal with Feelings That Interfere with Learning

The memories of my own teachers -- both those I loved and those I hated -- made me decide to become one.

I had a long, mental list of all the mean things I would never say or do to my students and a clear vision of how infinitely patient and understanding I would be. All during my education courses in college, I held on to my conviction that I could teach kids in a way that would make them want to learn.

My first day as a "real" teacher came as a shock. As much as I had planned and prepared, I was totally unprepared for these thirty-two sixth graders. Thirty-two kids with loud voices, high energy, and powerful wants and needs. Halfway through the morning the first rumblings began: "Who stole my pencil?!"... "Get out of my face!"... "Shut up. I'm tryin' to listen to the teacher!"

I pretended not to hear and went on with the lesson, but the eruptions continued: "Why do I have to sit next to him?"... "I don't understand what we're supposed to do."... "He punched me!"... "She started it!"

My head began to pound. The noise level in the room continued to rise. Words of "patience and understanding" died on my lips. This class needed a teacher who was in charge and in control. I heard myself saying:

"Cut it out. Nobody stole your pencil."

"You have to sit next to him because I said so."

"I don't care who started it. I want it ended. Now!"

"What do you mean you don't understand? I just explained it."

"I can't believe this class. You're acting like first graders. Will you please sit still!"

One boy ignored me. He left his seat, walked over to the sharpener, and stood there grinding his pencil to a nub. In my firmest voice I ordered, "That's enough! Sit down right now!"

"You can't make me do nothin'," he said.

"We'll talk about this after school."

"I can't stay. I ride the bus."

"Then I'll need to call your parents to get this settled."

"You can't call my parents. We don't got no phone."

By three o'clock I was exhausted. The kids burst out of the classroom and spilled out onto the streets. More power to them. They were their parents' responsibility now. I'd done my time.

I slumped in my chair and stared at the empty desks. What went wrong? Why wouldn't they listen? What did I have to do to get through to these kids?

All during those first few months of teaching, the pattern was the same. I'd start each morning with high hopes and leave every afternoon feeling overwhelmed by the drudgery and tedium of having to drag my class through the required curriculum. But worse than anything, I was turning into the kind of teacher I never wanted to be -- angry, bossy, and belittling. And my students were becoming increasingly sullen and defiant. As the term wore on, I found myself wondering how long I could last.

Jane Davis, the teacher next door, came to my rescue. The day after I poured my heart out to her, she stopped by my room and handed me her worn copy of *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*. "I don't know if this will help," she said, "but the skills in this book saved my sanity with my own kids at home. And they sure make a difference in my classroom!"

I thanked her, put the book in my briefcase, and forgot about it. A week later I was lying in bed nursing a cold. Idly I reached for the book and opened it. The italicized words on the first page jumped out at me.

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!

I lay back on my pillow and closed my eyes. Did I accept my students' feelings? In my head I replayed some of the exchanges I'd had with the kids that week:

*Student:* I can't write.

*Me:* That's not true.

*Student:* But I can't think of anything to write about.

*Me:* Yes, you can! Just quit complaining and start writing.

*Student:* I hate history. Who cares what happened a hundred years ago?

*Me:* You should care. It's important to know your country's history.

*Student:* It's boring.

*Me:* No, it isn't! If you paid attention, you'd find it interesting.

It was ironic. I was the one who was always preaching to the children about the right of each individual to his or her opinions and feelings. Yet in practice, whenever the kids expressed their feelings, I dismissed them. Argued with them. My underlying message was "You're wrong to feel what you feel. Listen to me instead."

I sat up in bed and tried to remember. Did my teachers ever do that to me? There was that one time in high school when I was stricken over my first failing grade and my math teacher tried to give me a pep talk: "There's nothing to be upset about, Liz. It's not that you lack ability in geometry. You just haven't applied yourself. You have to make up your mind that you're going to do it. The trouble with you is, *your attitude is bad.*"

He was probably right, and I knew he meant well, but his words left me feeling stupid and inadequate. At one point I stopped listening and watched his mustache moving up and down and waited for him to finish so I could get away from him. Is that what my students felt about me?

Over the next few weeks I tried to respond more sensitively to my students' feelings, to reflect them accurately:

*"It's not easy to choose a topic you want to write about."*

*"I hear how you feel about history. You're wondering why anyone would even care about what happened so long ago."*

It helped. I could see immediately that the kids experienced the difference. They nodded, looked me straight in the eye, and told me more. Then one day Alex announced, "I don't want to go to gym and no one can make me!" That was enough. I didn't hesitate for a minute. In icy tones I answered, "You *will* go to gym or you will go to the office!"

Why was it so hard to acknowledge kids' feelings? At lunch I asked that same question aloud and told my friend Jane and the others at my table what I'd been reading and thinking about.

Maria Estes, a parent volunteer, sprang to the defense of teachers. "There are so many children to teach," she said, "and so much to teach them. How can you expect yourself to worry about every little word?"

Jane looked thoughtful. "Maybe," she said, "if the adults in our lives had worried a little about *their* words, we wouldn't have so much to unlearn today. Let's face it. We're products of our past.

We speak to our students the way our parents and teachers spoke to us. I know, even with my own kids at home, it took me a long time to stop repeating the old script. It was a big step for me to go from *'That doesn't hurt. It's only a little scratch'* to *'A scratch can hurt!'*"

Ken Watson, a science teacher, looked baffled. "Am I missing something?" he asked. "I don't see that it makes much difference."

I thought hard, hoping to come up with an example that would let him experience the difference for himself. Then I heard Jane say, "Ken, imagine that you're a teenager and that you'd just made the school team -- basketball, football, whatever."

Ken smiled. "Soccer," he said.

"Okay," Jane said, nodding, "now imagine you went to your first practice session, filled with enthusiasm, and the coach called you aside and told you that you were cut from the team."

Ken groaned.

"A little later," Jane continued, "you see your home-room teacher in the hallway and tell her what just happened. Now pretend that I'm that teacher. I'll respond to your experience in a number of different ways. Just for the heck of it, jot down what the kid inside you feels or thinks after each of my responses."

Ken grinned, took out his pen, and reached for a paper napkin to write on.

Here are the different approaches Jane tried with him:

### **Denial of Feelings**

"You're getting yourself all worked up over nothing. The world isn't going to come to an end because you didn't make some team. Forget about it."

### **The Philosophical Response**

"Life isn't always fair, but you have to learn to roll with the punches."

### **Advice**

"You can't let these things get you down. Try out for another team."

### **Questions**

"Why do you think you were dropped? Were the other players better than you? What are you going to do now?"

### **Defense of the Other Person**

"Try to see it from the coach's point of view. He wants to produce a winning team. It must have been tough for him to decide who to keep and who let go."

## **Pity**

"Oh, you poor thing. I'm so sorry for you. You tried so hard to make the team, but you just weren't good enough. Now all the other kids know. I'll bet you could just die of embarrassment."

## **Amateur Psychoanalysis**

"Did you ever consider that the real reason you were cut from the team was that your heart wasn't in your playing? I think that on a subconscious level you didn't want to be on the team, so you messed up on purpose."

Ken threw up his hands. "Stop! Enough. I get the idea."

I asked Ken if I could see what he had written. He tossed me the napkin. I read it aloud:

"Don't tell me how to feel."

"Don't tell me what to do."

"You'll never understand."

"You know what you can do with your questions!"

"You're taking everybody's side but mine."

"I'm a loser."

"That's the last time I'll ever tell you anything."

"Oh, dear," Maria said. "A lot of those things that Jane just said to Ken sound like what I say to my son, Marco. So what could you do instead?"

"Acknowledge the child's distress," I answered quickly.

"How?" Maria asked.

The words wouldn't come to me. I looked to Jane for help. She turned to Ken and fixed her eyes upon him. "Ken," she said, "to find that you were cut from the team when you were so sure you were on it must have been a big shock and a big disappointment!"

Ken nodded. "It's true," he said. "It was a shock. And it was a disappointment. And frankly, it's a relief to have someone finally understand that simple fact."

We all had a lot to say to each other after that. Maria confided that no one had ever acknowledged her feelings when she was growing up. Ken asked, "How are we supposed to give our students what we never had ourselves?" Clearly, we needed more practice if we wanted to become comfortable with this new way of responding to the children. I volunteered to bring in

some examples showing how we could acknowledge feelings in the school setting. Here, in cartoon form, is what I worked out and brought to my lunch buddies a few days later:

### **INSTEAD OF DENYING FEELINGS**

When feelings are denied, a student can easily become discouraged.

### **PUT THE FEELINGS INTO WORDS**

When negative feelings are identified and accepted, a student feels encouraged to continue to strive.

### **INSTEAD OF CRITICISM AND ADVICE**

The teacher means well, but when a student is bombarded with criticism and advice, he finds it difficult to think about his problem or take responsibility for it.

### **ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS WITH A WORD OR SOUND ("OH" OR "MMM" OR "UH" OR "I SEE")**

By responding to a student's distress with an attitude of concern and an occasional nod or "grunt" of understanding, we free him to focus on his problem and possibly solve it himself.

### **INSTEAD OF REASONS AND EXPLANATIONS**

It's frustrating when a student refuses to respond to "reason." What can we do instead? Is there a better way to help students overcome their resistance to a task?

### **GIVE IN FANTASY WHAT YOU CAN'T GIVE IN REALITY**

When we express a student's wishes in fantasy, we make it easier for her to deal with reality.

### **INSTEAD OF IGNORING FEELINGS**

It's hard for children to change their behavior when their feelings are completely ignored.

### **ACCEPT FEELINGS EVEN AS YOU STOP UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR**

It's easier for children to change their behavior when their feelings have been accepted.

Ken looked at the illustrations and shook his head. "Theoretically, this all sounds wonderful, but to me it's just one more demand upon teachers. Where are we supposed to find the time to help students deal with their feelings?"

Jane's eyes twinkled. "You make time," she said. "Get to school earlier, leave later, rush through lunch, and forget about bathroom breaks."

"Yeah," Ken added, "and somewhere in between planning lessons, grading papers, developing bulletin boards, preparing for conferences -- and incidentally, teaching -- worry about what your students might be feeling or how to give them in fantasy what they can't have in reality."

As I listened to Ken, I thought, "Maybe it is too much to ask of teachers."

It was as if Jane had read my mind. "Seriously," she said, "I know it's a lot to ask of teachers, but I also know how important it is for children to feel understood. The plain fact is that when students are upset, they *can't* concentrate. And they certainly can't absorb new material. If we want to free their minds to think and learn, then we have to deal respectfully with their emotions."

"And not just at school, but at home," Mafia added emphatically.

We all turned to look at her. "When I was about nine years old," she explained, "my family moved, and I had to go to a new school. My new teacher was very strict. Whenever I took an arithmetic test, she would hand it back to me with big black X's over every answer I got wrong. She made me bring my paper up to her desk again and again until I got it right. I was so nervous in her class, I couldn't think. Sometimes I even tried to copy the answers from other children. The night before a test, I always got a stomachache. I would say, 'Mama, I'm scared.' And she'd say, 'There's nothing to be scared of. Just do your best.' And my father would say, 'If you'd study, you wouldn't have to be scared.' Then I'd feel even worse."

Ken looked at her quizzically. "Suppose your mother or father had said, 'You sound very worried about that test, Maria.' Would that have made a difference?"

"Oh, yes!" Maria exclaimed. "Because then I could have told them about the black X's and the shame of having to do it again and again in front of the whole class."

Ken was still skeptical. "And that would be enough to make you feel less anxious and do better in math?"

Maria paused. "I think so," she said slowly, "because if my parents had listened to my worries and let me talk about them, then I think I would have had more courage to go to school the next day and the ambition to try harder."

A few days after this conversation took place, Mafia returned, all smiles, and pulled out a small piece of folded paper from her purse. "I want you to hear some of the things my own children said to me this week. After I tell you, you must all guess what I *didn't* say to them. The first is from my daughter, Ana Ruth." Mafia unfolded her paper and read: "Mama, my gym teacher made me run laps because I didn't get dressed fast enough and everyone was looking at me."

Ken answered immediately. "You didn't say, '*What did you expect your teacher to do? Applaud you? Give you a medal for being slow?*'"

Everyone at the table laughed. Mafia said, "Now here's my son, Marco: 'Ma, don't get mad. I lost my new gloves.'"

"This one is mine," Jane said. *"What?! That's the second pair of gloves you've lost this month. Do you think we're made of money? In the future, when you take your gloves off, put them in your pocket. And before you leave the bus, check the seat and the floor to make sure they haven't fallen out."*

"Hold it. What's wrong with that?" Ken asked. "You're teaching him responsibility."

"The timing is wrong," said Jane.

"Why's that?"

"Because when a person is drowning, it's not the time to give swimming lessons."

"Hmmm," said Ken. "I'll have to think about that one....Okay, your turn, Liz," he announced, pointing to me. Maria looked down at her paper and said, "This is also from Ana Ruth: 'I don't know if I want to be in the orchestra any-more.'"

I jumped right in. *"After all the money we've spent on your violin lessons, you're talking about quitting! Your father is going to be very upset when he hears this."*

Maria looked at us in amazement. "How did all of you know what I almost said?"

"Easy," said Jane. "That's what our parents said to us and what I still catch myself saying to my own kids."

"Mafia," Ken said, "don't keep us in suspense. What *did* you say to your children?"

"Well," Maria answered proudly, "when Marco couldn't find his new gloves, I didn't lecture him. I said, *'It can be very upsetting to lose something....Do you think you could have left your gloves on the bus?'* He stared at me as if he couldn't believe his ears and said tomorrow morning he'd ask the bus driver if he found them.

"And when Ana Ruth told me the gym teacher made her do laps in front of everybody, I said, *'That must have been embarrassing.'* She said, 'Yes, it was,' and then changed the subject, which is not unusual for her, because she never tells me anything that's going on.

"But the big surprise is what happened later. After her music lesson she said, 'I don't know if I want to be in the orchestra anymore.' Her words took the breath out of me, but I said, *'So, a part of you wants to stay in the orchestra and a part of you doesn't.'* She became very quiet. Then she started talking and it all came out. She told me she liked playing but that the rehearsals took up so much of her time, she never saw her friends anymore, and now they never even call her and maybe they aren't really her friends anymore. Then she began to cry and I held her."



"Oh, Maria," I said, deeply touched by her experience.

"It's funny, isn't it?" Jane said. "Ana Ruth couldn't tell you what was really troubling her until you accepted her mixed-up feelings."

"Yes," Maria agreed enthusiastically, "and once the real problem was out in the open, she got an idea for how to help herself. The next day she told me she decided to stay in the orchestra and maybe she could make some new friends there."

"That's wonderful!" I said.

"Yes," Maria said with a slight frown, "but I only told you the good things I did. I didn't tell you what happened when Marco told me he hated Mr. Peterson."

"Oooh...That's a tough one," I said. "Didn't you work in Mr. Peterson's class all last year?"

Maria looked pained. "A very fine teacher," she murmured. "Very dedicated."

"That's what I mean," I said. "You were in a bind. On the one hand, you wanted to support your son. On the other hand, you think highly of Mr. Peterson and didn't want to be critical of him."

"Not just Mr. Peterson," said Maria. "I'm probably old-fashioned, but I was brought up to believe that it's wrong to let a child talk against any teacher."

"But supporting your son," exclaimed Jane, "doesn't mean you have to disapprove of Mr. Peterson." She quickly sketched in her version of a parent's typical reaction when a child complains about his teacher. Then we all worked together on creating a helpful dialogue. Our challenge was to avoid agreeing with the child or putting down the teacher. Here's what we came up with:

## **INSTEAD OF CRITICISM, QUESTIONS, AND ADVICE**

### **ACCEPT AND REFLECT FEELINGS AND WISHES**

The bell rang. Ken picked up his lunch tray and said, "I'm still not sure about all this stuff. Maybe it's okay for parents, but it seems to me it ought to be enough for a teacher to be a decent person who likes kids, knows his subject, and knows how to teach it."

"Unfortunately," said Jane, walking out with him, "it isn't. If you want to be able to teach, then you need students who are emotionally ready to listen and learn."

I tagged behind, feeling there was more to say but not sure what. Driving home in the car that afternoon, I replayed the many conversations of the week and felt a new conviction growing within.

I wished I had thought to tell Ken:

As teachers our goal is greater than just passing on facts and information.

If we want our students to be caring human beings, then we need to respond to them in caring ways.

If we value our children's dignity, then we need to model the methods that affirm their dignity.

If we want to send out into the world young people who respect themselves and respect others, then we need to begin by respecting them. And we can't do that unless we show respect for what it is they feel.

That's what I wished I had said.

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