

Speak So They'll Hear,
Listen So They'll Share:
Practical Strategies for Building
Healthy Communication

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Overview and Goals

- Research: Why Parent-Child communication matters!
- Modeling respectful communication
- Challenging your own thinking mistakes
- The LISTEN framework
- Key points for difficult conversations
 - Body safety and sexual abuse, bullying, family or job change, serious illness, scary world events
- Questions!

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Warm, communicative parenting has been studied for decades across thousands of families. The findings are remarkably consistent: how parents communicate with children shapes outcomes in mental health, academic performance, and self-concept.

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Mental Health Impact

When children trust their parents, they turn to them (or others) when they need help!

Adolescents who perceive strong mutual trust with their parents engage in fewer high-risk behaviors, feel less loneliness, and show better psychosocial adjustment

Adolescent-rated parent-child communication quality is negatively associated with general mental health and specific domains, including depression, anxiety, psychosis, suicidal ideation, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and addictive internet use/gaming.

Children learn to seek help from parents when caregivers consistently respond with support and reliability

Barrett et al. (1996)

Children exposed to caregivers who reliably provided support developed stronger trust — and this trust directly predicted greater help-seeking behaviors.

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Communication & Academic Outcomes

Parental communication and warmth are among the strongest predictors of school success

SELF-ESTEEM BOOST

Authoritative (warm, communicative) parenting linked to significantly higher self-esteem in 116-study meta-analysis vs. neglectful styles (r=0.18)

EXTRA ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Active parent engagement — including educational home conversations — can add months of academic progress per year, with greater gains for struggling students

LASTING EFFECT

Quality of early home learning environment predicted children's reading and math performance nearly a decade later in a longitudinal study of 2,204 families



Pinquart & Gerler (2019) • Joneke (2012) • Early Head Start Evaluation Study (2010)

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Emotional Validation & Self-Esteem

"Parents who validate and acknowledge their children's emotions serve as critical agents for the development of children's emotional resilience and self-esteem."

How you parent matters!

Authoritative (warm, communicative) parenting shows a consistent positive effect on child self-esteem across 116 studies

Lifelong benefit

Consistently responsive, warm parenting creates secure attachment, which is the foundation for healthy self-esteem and confidence

Conditional regard backfires

Children whose parents make affection conditional on performance develop fragile, unstable self-worth linked to depressive symptoms

Greater self-esteem → stronger academics

Parental trust and support in early childhood predicts adolescent self-esteem, which in turn predicts stronger school learning engagement

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When parents model respectful communication, children learn to navigate challenges, build positive relationships, and advocate for themselves effectively.

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Modeling Respectful Communication

- Model with your partner/spouse.
- Model with your children.
- Model with strangers.
- Model with people with differences.

- Talk the way that you want your children to talk.
- Talk as if you are being watched.

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Modeling Respectful Communication

<p>Constructive Criticism VS Shaming</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Words: Labeling the behavior versus personality trait/jargon • Tone: Neutral voice versus sarcasm/aggression 	<p>"I" Talk VS "You" Talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Own your feelings and thoughts—nothing bothers everyone • "I am getting frustrated" vs "You never listen"
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DEAR MAN

Teach children (and model yourself!) how to communicate needs clearly and respectfully;

D	Describe <small>State the situation factually — no judgments</small>	<i>"When I came home, the dishes weren't done..."</i>
E	Express <small>Share your feelings using "I" statements</small>	<i>"I felt frustrated because I was tired too"</i>
A	Assert <small>Ask clearly for what you want or say no directly</small>	<i>"I'd like us to share chores after dinner"</i>
R	Reinforce <small>Explain the benefit for both of you</small>	<i>"So we can get them done quicker and both have time to relax"</i>
M	Mindful <small>Stay focused on your goal; don't get distracted</small>	<i>"Let's come back to this after we've both calmed down"</i>
A	Appear confident <small>Use confident posture and a calm, steady voice</small>	<i>Eye contact, open body language, even tone, phone down</i>
N	Negotiate <small>Be willing to give to get; find middle ground</small>	<i>"Do you have another suggestion? What do you think about my idea?"</i>

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Are my thoughts causing me problems?

- The way we think is associated with our feelings, behavior, and consequences of that behavior.
- David Kolko, Dr. Brown and others (2011) have developed a diagram to understand this (next slide)

HUDSON Therapy

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Challenging Negative Thinking

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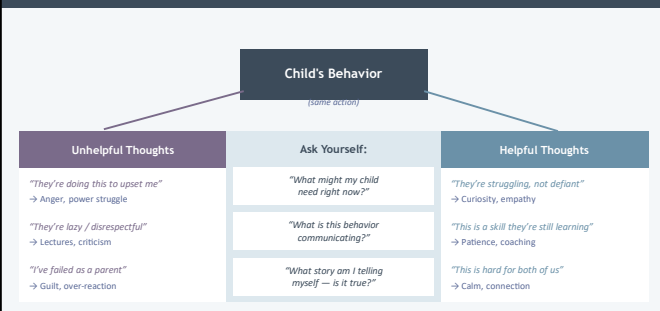
Challenging Negative Thinking

- Notice your thought—is it inaccurate or unhelpful?
- What are the feelings associated with that thought?
- What behaviors are associated with that thought?
- What are the consequences of those behaviors?

Let feelings and behaviors flow from more accurate, helpful thoughts.

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How you interpret your child's behavior matters!



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Ways to Model Emotional Control

- Talk aloud when you are having/had a stressful moment to show how you solve problems and handle strong emotions.
- Convey comfort in talking about upsetting topics (even if you are not).
- Help your child identify and manage emotions—at the right time! Strike when the iron is cold.

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Emotional Regulation Tools

Helping Your Child Learn to Regulate

- Model calm — children regulate by watching how you do it
- Name emotions aloud: "I feel frustrated right now"
- Come up with coping skills and practice when calm
- Create a "calm down corner" or develop an "exit and wait" plan
- You cannot teach them anything when they are really dysregulated!



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When parents actively listen, children feel validated and learn the importance of actively listening to others.

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The LISTEN Framework

L Look Put devices down. Make eye contact and be fully present.	T Tune in Notice body language and emotional tone, not just words.
I Inquire Ask open-ended questions — "What was the best part of your day?"	E Empathize Validate feelings before jumping to solutions or advice.
S Summarize Reflect back what you heard to show understanding.	N No judgment Create a safe space where any feeling is okay to share.

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Active Listening: Do's & Don'ts

✓ DO	✗ DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get down to their physical level Reflect feelings: "It sounds like you felt left out" Use minimal encouragers ("mm-hmm", "tell me more") Tolerate silence — they're processing Ask: "Is there anything else?" before responding Ask: "Do you want me to help figure this out? Or do you just want me to listen?" Thank them for sharing with you 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jump straight to problem-solving or advice Minimise: "It's not a big deal" / "You'll be fine" Interrogate with rapid-fire questions Share your own similar story (hijacks their moment) Check your phone or multitask while listening Punish or lecture during an emotional moment

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Radical Acceptance & Validation

Radical Acceptance	The 6 Levels of Validation
<p><i>Accepting reality as it is — not approval, but acknowledgment — reduces suffering for both parent and child.</i></p> <p>Say to yourself: "This is hard AND it is what it is right now"</p> <p>To your child: "I can see this situation feels unfair to you"</p> <p>Avoid: "You shouldn't feel that way" or "Just get over it"</p> <p>Practice: Noticing your own resistance before responding</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Be present Put everything down and show up fully 2 Reflect back "It sounds like you felt left out" 3 Read the mind Notice unspoken feelings and name them 4 Understand history "Given what happened, this makes sense" 5 Acknowledge the valid "Anyone in your shoes would feel this way" 6 Showing equality "If I were in that situation, I would feel that way too"

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Communication Strategies by Age


Ages 3-6	Ages 7-11	Ages 12-15	Ages 16-18
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use simple, concrete language Name emotions through play & stories Praise specific behaviors, not traits Narrate your own feelings aloud 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask about hypotheticals & opinions Use side-by-side activities to talk Increase feelings vocabulary Involve them in family decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knock before entering — respect privacy Don't take bids for arguments personally Drive time is gold for conversation Ask opinions before giving advice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Treat as an emerging adult Repair quickly after conflict Share your own vulnerabilities Be curious, not interrogative

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Things to say instead of "How was school?"

- 1 New**
"What was something new you tried today? What was something new you learned today?"
- 2 Inquire**
"What was the best part of your day? Who was fun to be around?"
- 3 Kind**
"What is something kind you did today? Did you notice something kind a friend did?"
- 4 Challenges**
"Did you have any challenges or tough moments today?"
- 5 Future**
"What are you looking forward to at school tomorrow?"



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Using the Cognitive Triangle with Kids

THOUGHTS

"Nobody likes me"

FEELINGS

Sad, Lonely, Anxious

BEHAVIORS

Withdraws, Avoids school

How to use with your child:

Ask: "What were you thinking when that happened?"
 Ask: "How did that make you feel?"
 Ask: "What did you do next?"
 Help them see the connection between the three

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Helping Kids Challenge Their Negative Thinking

Help children examine and reframe unhelpful thoughts: Change the radio station!

1. CATCH IT	2. CHECK IT	3. CHANGE IT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notice the thought "What's going through your mind?" Name it without judgment Use a 'thought diary' or drawing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is this thought 100% true? "What's the evidence?" "Would your best friend say this?" "Would you say this to your best friend?" Rate belief 0-10 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generate a balanced thought "What would a kind voice say?" Practice the new thought aloud Celebrate the effort, not outcome

Ages 6-9: Use cartoons & "thought bubbles" · Ages 10-13: Use journals · Teens: Socratic questioning works well

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Children need age-honest, emotionally safe conversations about the difficult realities they encounter — silence rarely protects them.

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Key Points for Difficult Conversations

<p>1 Follow their lead</p> <p>Answer the question they ask — not more. Children ask for exactly the amount of information they can handle right now.</p>	<p>2 Use honest, age-appropriate language</p> <p>Avoid euphemisms that confuse young children ("passed away", "bad touch"). Use real words calmly and clearly.</p>
<p>3 Regulate yourself first</p> <p>Your tone teaches more than your words. If you are visibly distressed, your child will focus on managing your emotion, not processing their own.</p>	<p>4 Reassure their safety & your availability</p> <p>End every difficult conversation with: "You can always come back to me with more questions." You want to be the person they go to for tough questions/topics!</p>
<p>5 Revisit, not a one and done!</p> <p>One conversation is never enough. Check in over days and weeks. Understanding deepens as children grow. If you don't know the answer to a question, say you'll look into and get back to them and then actually do it!</p>	<p>6 Watch for signs they need more support</p> <p>Sleep changes, regression, withdrawal, new fears, or not enjoying the things they used to enjoy signal that professional support may be helpful.</p>

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Talking About Body Safety & Sexual Abuse

Building Body Safety (All Ages)	If a Child Discloses Abuse
<p>Use correct anatomical names</p> <p>This removes shame and makes disclosures clearer to adults and professionals.</p>	<p>Stay calm — your reaction matters most</p> <p>The child does not need to worry about how you are feeling in this moment, it's hard enough!</p>
<p>Teach the concept of consent</p> <p>"Your body belongs to you. No one should touch your private parts except a doctor, with your parent present."</p>	<p>Believe and thank them</p> <p>"I believe you. Thank you for telling me. You did nothing wrong."</p>
<p>Name the 'uh-oh' feeling</p> <p>"If something feels wrong or uncomfortable, that feeling is important — always tell me."</p>	<p>Don't interrogate</p> <p>Ask only: "Can you tell me more?" Then stop. Don't push it!</p>
<p>Reinforce no secrets rule</p> <p>"Surprises are okay. Secrets that make you feel bad or scared are never okay. The difference is a surprise ends."</p>	<p>Don't promise to keep secrets</p> <p>"I have to tell someone whose job it is to keep children safe."</p>
<p>Practice with scenarios</p> <p>Role-play "What would you do if..." so children have rehearsed responses ready.</p>	<p>Contact authorities promptly</p> <p>Report to child protective services or law enforcement. Seek a child advocacy center for forensic interview (e.g., CHPS Center).</p>

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Talking About Bullying

Bullying = repeated, intentional harm with a power imbalance.

Opening the Conversation	When Your Child is Targeted	When Your Child is the Bully
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Have you ever seen anyone being left out or treated unkindly?" Start with general questions before personal ones Validate: "I know it's hard to talk about these things." Build self-efficacy: it's the best strategy for preventing your child from being bullied or bullying others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Believe them — avoid "just ignore it" or "toughen up" Document incidents: dates, witnesses, what was said Work with school through formal channels Build their sense of belonging in other arenas Watch for anxiety, school avoidance, sleep changes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stay calm — shame closes the conversation Separate behavior from identity: "This behavior is not okay" not "You are bad" Co-create a repair plan with the school Seek support if behavior persists

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Talking About Family or Job Change

What Children Need to Hear	What to Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● "This is not your fault — not even a little bit." ● "You will always have two parents who love you." ● "The adults will take care of the adult problems." ● "It's okay to feel sad, angry, or confused about this." ● "You don't have to choose sides — ever." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using children as messengers between parents Speaking negatively about the other parent Oversharing adult details (finances, infidelity) Making children feel responsible for your emotions Changing routines abruptly

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Talking About Serious Illness in the Family

Honest, simple information reduces fear.

Initial Disclosure	During Treatment	When Prognosis is Poor	Across All Stages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the real name of the illness Explain in concrete terms: "The sick part is in Dad's chest" Be clear about what will change day-to-day Answer "Will you die?" with honesty appropriate to prognosis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep routines as stable as possible Give age-appropriate roles: "You can help by..." Name changes they'll see (hair loss, fatigue) before they happen Allow visits to hospital when appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Don't hide a terminal prognosis — children sense it Allow them to say goodbye in their own way Read age-appropriate books about death together Consider seeing a therapist to establish rapport before bad outcome 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "You can ask me anything, any time" Check in regularly — their questions will change Monitor for grief reactions at school Take care of yourself — you can't pour from empty

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Talking About Violence or Scary World Events

Fred Rogers: "Look for the helpers." Your first job is to be the safe base — then to explain.

What to Do & Say	Recognising Trauma Responses
<p>Start by asking what they know <small>"Have you heard anything about what happened? What have you heard?" Correct misinformation gently.</small></p> <p>Give honest, brief facts <small>"Something very sad happened. Some people were hurt. Adults are working hard to keep everyone safe."</small></p> <p>Emphasize safety and helpers <small>Name the specific adults protecting them: police, SROs, teachers, you.</small></p> <p>Limit media exposure <small>Be mindful of having the news on or watching social media videos in their presence.</small></p>	<p>Normal short-term reactions <small>Clinginess, nightmares, regression, repetitive play about the event — these are processing, not pathology.</small></p> <p>When to seek help <small>Symptoms persisting 4+ weeks, significant functional impairment, or if the child was directly exposed.</small></p> <p>Avoid avoidance <small>Gently maintaining routines and talking about the event is more protective than steering clear of it.</small></p> <p>Your own reaction matters <small>If you are traumatised, get support first. Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others.</small></p>

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Your 7-Day Starter Practice Plan

Day 1	Device-free dinner or bedtime routine — just talk	Day 5	Validate a feeling once/day (remember you can validate without agreeing with the feeling)
Day 2	Try the LISTEN framework in one conversation	Day 6	Plan for and execute a hard conversation (use stuffed animals for young kids)
Day 3	Teach the Thought-Feeling-Behavior triangle	Day 7	Reflect together: "What's working? What do you want to keep doing?"
Day 4	Add a new question from your "How was your day?" alternatives list	<i>Remember: progress over perfection!</i>	


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Key Takeaway

- Kids ask questions they can handle the answers to-follow their lead!

Thank you for coming!

Questions please!



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