

Chapter 5

*T*alking to Rather Than
At Your Child

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*You can't reason someone out of something they
weren't reasoned into.*

-Jonathan Swift

Bridge Builder's Tip



Speaking to your child's feelings rather than her logic and her beliefs will create a supportive climate.

"Oh good, you're still there," Lisa said. "I was afraid I was going to get your answering machine. I'm sorry to call you so late, but I don't know what else to do. I'm calling about Katie, Steve. I'm worried sick about her."

I hadn't seen Lisa or her daughter, Katie, in at least two years—not since the funeral of her late husband, Ted.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"Katie's totally out of control, I can't seem to reach her anymore," Lisa said.

"She's been through a lot this past year, Lisa," I said.

"I know that, Steve. When Ted first died, it was awful for her. She withdrew from everyone. But I thought she was coming around after the first few months. She became more like her old self. She started playing with her friends. Her laughter had returned.

"But ever since I married Bob, did you know that I remarried a couple of months ago and moved up north?"

"Yes, I had heard. Congratulations!" I said.

"Bob's such a good man. He loves Katie to death. He's been kind and patient with her. He has a daughter just a year older than Katie."

"Our new house is wonderful. Her new school is top notch. There are some great opportunities for her up here that I couldn't have given her if we stayed in the city."

"It all sounds great, so what's the big deal?" I asked.

"I feel like I'm losing Katie. There are times I barely recognize who this person is in my daughter's body."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"School started six weeks ago. She's already been suspended twice. I've gotten two notes from school saying she isn't doing her homework. That's just not like Katie.

"At home, she's done a complete turn around. Before, she'd help me with whatever I asked her to do—groceries, straightening up, if I was running late at work, she'd set the table, maybe do some of the prep for dinner.

"I never had to ask her to clean her room—now it's a disaster in there. This thing with school. You know Katie, this is so unlike her. I gotta tell you, I'm at my wits end."

"Have you tried talking to her?" I asked.

"Of course I have!" Lisa responded, irritated at me for asking the obvious.

"What does she have to say for herself?"

"She has nothing to say for herself. Well, that's not exactly true. She says I'm overreacting—that I'm making a mountain out of a molehill.

"It's gotten to the point when I ask her about school, she gets angry and storms out of the room."

"I know I shouldn't, I know it only makes matters worse, but I go running after her, shouting and screaming, threatening her if she doesn't change her attitude."

"How well is that working?"

"Obviously, not very well," Lisa said.

"But I can't help myself. You know, she's not the angel you remember her being. She can say some pretty harsh things, herself. We've been together too long. She knows what buttons to push to get me going."

“Lisa, you don’t need to explain anything to me. I know how hard it’s been for both of you. I’m a friend, remember. I’m on both of your sides.”

“I’m sorry Steve. It’s just that I’m scared. I feel like she’s slipping away, yet all I do is get angry with her.”

“That’s a helpful admission. All this frustration and anger, it sounds like the powerlessness is overwhelming.”

“Steve, I’m trying. I tell her how grateful she should be for this new opportunity. Her step-sister and step-father both adore her—at least when Katie let’s them.

“I can’t believe how wonderful her school is. It’s like night and day compared to where she was. Yet, whenever I point that out to her, she blows up and says I don’t understand. She calls me names, goes up to her room, slams the door and barricades herself in for the night.”

“I have a suggestion, it’s going to take some practice and a lot of patience. It’s not a quick fix. But if you stay with it I promise you Katie will find her way back to you.”

“Steve, I’ll try anything. Even if it means following one of your goofy sayings,” Lisa said.

“How did you know what I had in mind?” I asked.

There was no reply, only a been there, done that chuckle on the other end of the line.

“I’ve told you this one before, talk to Katie’s feelings, not her logic. Remember?”

“Yes, but I’ve never understood it.”

“Lisa, you said Katie’s room’s a mess these days?”

“It’s ungodly. Her clothes are all over the place. Whenever she gets angry with me, she goes up there and destroys anything she can get her hands on. Posters are torn up, she’s shredded some of her clothes. She shattered her lamp last night. She’s totally out of control.”

“Lisa, you have good reason to be concerned, but I think you can turn things around. Walk through this with me.”

“Okay. I’m trying to have some faith.”

“Think of the condition of her room as a mirror of her emotional insides. Imagine her bedroom is symbolic of what she’s feeling on the inside. Confused, torn apart, scattered, everything out of place, angry, hurt, scared.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

“Instead of seeing the condition of her room and some of the other things you mentioned as acts of defiance, try to see them as expressions of the turmoil she’s feeling on the inside about what’s happened to her life. Katie’s been through a lot in one year. Losing her father, her home, her friends, her place in her world. New home. New school. New step-sister. New step-father. New extended family. Nothing is the same. Now, when you talk to her, are you talking to her feelings about all these circumstances or are you appealing to her logic?”

“Steve, how can she not see how much better off we are now than nine months ago?”

“That’s not what I’m asking you? Have you acknowledged what’s she’s feeling or do you tell her what she should be feeling?” I asked.

“Now I’m lost,” Lisa said. “I guess I don’t know what to say to her anymore.”

“Stay with me, Lisa. I’m not blaming you. I want you to find your way out of this so you can be there for Katie.”

I continued, “Her dad died only a short while ago, how does she feel about that today?”

“I don’t know, I guess angry, maybe even sad.”

“And, then less than a year later she has to move from

the only home she's ever known, the only friends she's ever had. How does she feel about that?" I asked.

"The same I guess." Lisa said.

"And this great school she's in, what's she going through there?" I asked.

Lisa paused and then said, "She's starting all over again. New building. New teachers. New schoolmates. I guess she feels out of place, unsure of where she fits in."

"You're catching on," I said. "How about home?"

"I guess it's pretty much like at school. But she has me," Lisa said, somewhat chagrined.

"You know that, but does she? You're newly married. You've got this new relationship with Bob to worry about. You have a step-child to win over. Where does Katie fit in in all of that? I promise you that's what she's wondering about, that's what she's most worried about.

"Lisa, have you talked about any of this with her? Have you let her know you understand what she's going through? Have you acknowledged the feelings that are churning inside her—feelings she may not even understand yet? Have you hugged her and told her that you understand how scared and confused she is right now?"

"From what you've told me, it sounds like you're focusing on how she shouldn't feel bad about anything because of all the advantages that have come along with some of the changes. You're telling her to change the way she thinks about what has happened to her life.

"And she's telling you she's not ready to think and feel the way you want her to. All of this acting out—she's talking to you, Lisa. She's telling you she needs you to be there for her. She's telling you she needs you to support her rather than disapprove of her for what she's feeling.

"Once she trusts that you understand emotionally what she's going through, she'll settle down, I promise you. And the way she'll trust you is if you talk to her feelings rather than to her logic."

Here's the tool that will take you right to the center of your child's world. Speaking to your child's feelings is a gift of compassion and concern you offer to your child. You're demonstrating that you're connected to what they're experiencing at the soul of their being. Linking yourself to your child's emotions rather than locking horns with their belief system expresses that you are more interested in who they are than in trying to shape what they should believe.

Talking to your child's feelings is an act of profound communication. It acknowledges. Acknowledgment is the essence of what you have to offer your child. Talking to your child's feelings is the most powerful and genuine manifestation of your offering spirit. It's like turning up the setting of your offering spirit to 12 on a scale of one to ten. In so doing, you pour all of your energy of love and affection into your child.

Focusing on your child's feelings rather than engaging their belief system elevates any discussion you have with her. You transform the discussion from the battle ground of who's right and who's wrong into a discussion of how you understand your child's experiences. It lets her know that she need not fear a battle of wits with you. More importantly, it provides an opportunity for her to experience your warmth and love.

What we're talking about is going to the tenderest parts of who she is, embracing and validating those tender parts by loving them. It's like saying, "I see you. I

understand you. I see how frightened and lonely you are. I see how awkward it feels to be going through what you're going through right now. And all that I see, all that you reveal to me about you, I accept—I don't judge, I don't ridicule, I only love."

This is what your child is desperate for—this unconditional acceptance of who she is and what she's experiencing that makes her feel so vulnerable, frightened, and often so angry in the first place. If you're able to connect to those frail pieces buried beneath the bluster, the defensiveness, the secretiveness, the hostility, you'll have given her a gift of untold value. What you'll receive in return is an appreciation for who you are and what you've given her.

Speaking to your child's feelings accomplishes more than acknowledging what you understand about what she's experiencing. Speaking to your child's feelings helps clarify for her what it is that she's feeling. Do not underestimate the importance of this to her emotional well-being. *Your child needs you to help her become aware of what she's feeling, to clarify what she's feeling, so that ultimately, she's able to express what it is that she's feeling.*

Consider this for a moment. What's likely to help you connect with your child? What will encourage your child to be more expressive, speaking to your child's feelings or questioning and arguing with their beliefs? What impact would your willingness to patiently go through her struggles with her have on her? At the same time, what impact would invalidating your child's emotional experience by talking her out of what she's feeling have on her ability to understand her feelings.

Consider how Katie may have felt as her mom insisted Katie see things the way she wanted Katie to see them.

Can you see how confused Katie might become knowing she feels one way yet being told she should feel another way? Can you see how Katie might eventually begin to doubt her own feelings?

Can you see how, as Katie begins to doubt her own feelings she might begin looking to others to tell her how she should feel about any person or circumstance?

Can you see how the spiral of self-doubt and mistrust of one's own feelings is the formula for any person giving away their personal power?

Can you see how that spiral is the formula for much confusion, resentment, and chaos in one's relationships?

This is why your child needs you to help her understand what she's feeling, rather than tell her how to feel and think. Children don't have the emotional and intellectual maturity to be aware of everything they're feeling, let alone the language to express those feelings. Your willingness to go there with your child will give them the necessary experience and confidence to more directly express their feelings.

The more you encourage your child to express what she's feeling, the safer she'll feel with her feelings and her ability to express them. I promise that you'll begin to see your child becoming more expressive and less combative as a result of their ability to talk rather than act things out.

Let's practice talking to your child's feelings. Following are a few simple scenarios. See if you can figure out what the feelings are that need to be acknowledged and how you might address them. There are no wrong answers. The point is to figure out what you believe the feelings are and how best to address them.

Scenario #1

Bobby is talking to his dad about quitting piano lessons. "I don't want to play. I don't like the lessons and all the practicing. It's too hard. I'll never be any good."

His dad replies, "Don't be silly. I want you to play the piano. It's good for you. It teaches you self-discipline. It will better prepare you for school. Who knows, you might even get a scholarship someday if you're good enough."

Underlying feeling: Bobby may be feeling inadequate. Bobby may be feeling frustrated at his slow progress. He may feel afraid of disappointing his parents.

Response: "You know, Bobby, I'll always love you no matter how well you play the piano. I know you're afraid of not being the best, but that wouldn't change how I feel about you."

Now you give it a try. What's the underlying feeling(s) that Bobby is experiencing?

How would you respond to Bobby's feeling(s) rather than to his logic?

Scenario #2

Larry wants to stay up late to watch a movie. His dad wants him to go to bed.

"Why can't I watch the movie? It's not fair! You always let Billy do what he wants to do."

"Billy doesn't get to do what he wants to do, but he's older and so there are certain things I let him do," Billy's dad said.

"What's age got to do with it? You must love Billy more than you do me," Larry said.

"Now you're being ridiculous," Larry's father said.

"No I'm not! If you loved me as much as Larry, you'd let me watch the movie."

"I do love you as much as Larry. Didn't I buy you that new computer game yesterday. Why do you think I bought it?" dad asked, satisfied that he made his point.

What's the underlying feeling(s) Larry is experiencing?

How would you respond to Larry's feeling(s) rather than to his logic?

Scenario #3

Linda's teacher, Mrs. White, moved to Detroit. When Linda's new teacher, Mrs. Black, asked her if she missed Mrs. White, Linda ran over her foot with her bicycle.

"Linda, why did you run over my foot?" Mrs. Black asked.

“Because!”

“Because why? You should know better than to do that. Do you realize how much it hurt?” Mrs. Black said.

“I don't care about your foot,” Linda said, defiant.

“What do you mean you don't care? That's not nice. Didn't your Mrs. White teach you any better than that?”

Linda didn't respond. She just ran over Mrs. Black's foot again.

What underlying feeling(s) is Linda experiencing?

How would you respond to Linda's feeling(s) rather than to her logic?

Now that you've had some practice, let's apply this tip to a few situations with your child. Think of three scenarios where your child and you aren't connecting. Maybe there's a breakdown in communication or things have erupted into a power struggle where both of you are hurting rather than working at connecting with each other.

Identify in each scenario the feelings that your child is experiencing that you need to better acknowledge.

Now, write down in a sentence or two what you would say to more effectively acknowledge your child's feelings rather than speak to their logic.

I hope you revisit this chapter. It's critical that you

become more adept at speaking to your child's feelings. You'll find that you'll use this skill repeatedly in combination with many of the other skills we discuss throughout this book. Most importantly, when you're talking to your child's feelings, your offering spirit is flowing openly. That's the only way I know to sustain the emotional connection you're working so hard to create.

Of equal importance to building an emotional connection of understanding with your child is the relationship skill-validation. You'll discover in chapter 6 how important it is for you to not only listen to what your child is saying to you but be able to validate the feelings your child is experiencing.

Bridge Builder's Checklist



The benefits of talking to your child's feelings rather than their beliefs and logic.

1. Your child will feel understood.
2. Your child will begin to understand their feelings.
3. Your child will better trust their perceptions.
4. Your child will develop confidence about expressing their feelings to you and others.
5. Your child will reduce conflict as they begin to verbalize rather than act out their feelings.

List the benefits you and your child will experience if you speak to your child's feelings rather than to their beliefs and logic.