

Chapter 7

Let's Learn to Talk Things Out

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*Perhaps the chaos so many of us feel isn't a problem
but an opening.*

-Stanley Phillips

Bridge Builder's Tip



Empowering your child to express their feelings will lessen the need to act those feelings out.

Sophia came running through the front door with tears running down her cheeks. She went straight to her room, slamming the door, in case her mom missed the fact that she was upset.

Sophia's mom stood with her ear to the door, listening to the muffled sounds of Sophia crying. She gently knocked before coming in to see what the problem was.

"I'm never going to school again," Sophia declared.

"What happened, honey?" her mom asked.

"Benji Horowitz rode his big wheel right over my head."

"Not again, Sophia!"

"Yes, again! I'm not going back. You can't make me!"

"Sophia, I don't want to make you do anything,"

Mom said. "Right now, I'm more concerned with how upset you are." She wiped Sophia's face with a tissue.

"You know, dear, you and Benji Horowitz haven't been getting along for some time now. I can see how upsetting it is," mom said as she rubbed Sophia's back.

"I don't like him at all, Mom. That's why I don't want to go back to school. I don't want to have to ever see Benji Horowitz again."

"Honey, it must be awful scary for you, not knowing how to get Benji Horowitz to leave you alone."

"I know what to do, Mom. Before he ran over me, I kicked him right in his leg."

"Why did you kick him, honey?" Mom asked.

"Because he called me names. And you told me it wasn't nice to call somebody names—remember?"

"Yes, I remember. Why do you think he called you names, dear?"

"I don't know."

"What happened before he called you names?" Sophia's mom asked.

"I pulled his hair, just like you told me to do," Sophia said, beaming with pride.

"Honey, I don't remember telling you to pull Benji Horowitz's hair," Mom said, doing her best not to smile.

"Yes you did, Mom. Remember, you told me last night that I had to learn to stand up for myself. So during recess I went over to Benji Horowitz and said, 'Benji Horowitz, you're a big meanie.' And then I pulled his hair, just like you told me to."

"Honey, maybe, we better rethink our plan. I don't want you to pull Benji's hair, or kick him for that matter."

"But Mom..."

"No buts, I've got a new plan that's going to work. We're going to practice how to talk to Benji Horowitz so you won't have to kick him and he won't have to run over your face with his big wheel."

The most natural thing in the world for your child to do is to act out rather than express his feelings. Often, this is at the core of much of the conflict and hurt feelings that erupt between you and him. This dynamic is what interrupts the connecting of your offering spirit to his seeking spirit.

Follow my logic for a moment. If your child isn't practiced at or doesn't feel safe expressing his feelings, those unexpressed feelings will get acted out through his behavior. It makes sense, doesn't it? He needs a way to release what he's experiencing and express what he's feeling. And so, he acts out.

There are two ways he can act out what he's feeling. One, he can smother his feelings by turning inward— withdrawing and shutting down. As he puts his walls up, you feel more and more shut out. You know how frustrating it can be when your child digs his heels in. Call it what you want: resistance, disobedience, willful misconduct. Getting him to say what's going on can be impossible.

It could be he doesn't have the desire to talk. Maybe he doesn't have the language to express what he's experiencing. But boy, oh boy, does he know how to act out whatever is churning on the inside.

If he doesn't internalize his feelings he'll externalize them through his actions. Inevitably you'll become the target of his words and deeds. Never in a civil way, mind you. Never, "Mom I'm angry with you," or "Dad, when you laugh at me, I feel humiliated," or "Mom, when you say no to me, I feel powerless." Oh, if only that were the case, it would all be so much more simple.

Not one of you has escaped unscathed. And you can turn your cheek the other way only for so long. At some point, you're bound to react to being treated like a human pin cushion. Eventually, you'll lash out, verbally strike back. But you know as well as I that that isn't a solution but a short-term balm for what's hurting you.

No, just like Benji Horowitz and Sophia from the

story above, when two people's feelings get acted out rather than verbalized, the emotional connection gets buried beneath the resultant chaos. How can you be there for your child when you need to tend to your own wounds inflicted by his unkind words and actions?

Entering the world of your child, understanding, offering spirit, all can quickly become trite phrases. You're good intentions will eventually give way to fear, hurt, and powerlessness. Perhaps those feelings get buried beneath the anger that slowly consumes you.

You want desperately to reach your child, but you're unable to find a way to break down his walls. He doesn't make it easy for you. At some point, you may even lose sight of the fact that he's your child. He can begin to seem more like your tormentor. You want to be there for him, but things can turn adversarial quickly.

That's when the object of the game shifts from your offering spirit and his seeking spirit connecting. Now the game is about who can defeat whom.

Well, I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, there's an easy solution to this stalemate. The bad news is *you* have to do most of the work. The solution is to create a climate where your child feels safe verbalizing his feelings. If you place a value on expressing your feelings, your child will become more skilled at, and feel safer, expressing his.

He needs to learn from you. Until you place a premium on an emotionally expressive relationship, he'll never do so. He needs to learn that feelings can be safe when expressed to a person who isn't threatened by them. The more he sees you express your feelings and observe others express their feelings to you, the more he'll come to

trust the process I'm suggesting.

Freed from the fear of what your reaction might be, he'll begin to experiment with expressing his feelings to you. As this happens, you'll notice two things. First, some, if not much of his acting out will lessen. Second, your emotional bond will strengthen.

Therein lies the power of encouraging your child to express rather than act out their feelings. Less conflict and more connection. That's the one-two punch we're trying to create. More harmony, less struggle. It's not a pipedream. You can create such a relationship. But it all starts with a safe environment for emotional expression.

How best to create a safe environment? You can make it safe for your child by monitoring your reaction when he does express his feelings. If you pass his tests—and believe me, he is testing you—then he'll feel more comfortable talking to you.

Here are two tools—ways to monitor how you react. I've got one *do* and one *don't*. By using these two tools, you'll reduce much of the acting out and at the same time enrich your emotional connection with your child.

Bridge Builder's Tool



Don't personalize your children's words and deeds.

"That does it. I'm not going to tell you again. Clean this room up or else," Tom shouted at his son Matthew.

"Why? What's the big deal? You don't have to come

into my room. I don't have a problem with it, why should you?"

"Why? You want to know why? I'll tell you why! Because I said so, that's why."

"What's that suppose to mean?" Matthew sneered.

"Because I'm your father and I'm telling you to get in there and clean up that room. If you respected me, you would keep your room the way I want it kept. How about finding a different way to tell me to go screw myself."

How often have you felt the sting of your child's words or behaviors? How often have you felt stripped to the bone by their insensitive comments or actions?

On the other side of the coin, how often have you used something your child has said or done as some sort of litmus test for how much they love or respect you? How many times have you chosen to interpret your child's attitude, his words, or his deeds as an act of betrayal against you and your family?

We all do it. We personalize what is said to us. It's the human thing to do. But how well does it serve your larger goal of sustaining your emotional connection with your child. There's an inherent paradox when you personalize your child's words and actions. The times your child is acting out their feelings, the times you become the target of his acting out, those are the times he needs you the most.

It's these times when he needs you to stay connected, not have the connection broken off. He needs you to help him sort out what's going on within him. Clarifying his feelings. Helping him feel grounded. Ensuring his emotional safety as he gets out what he's feeling.

I'm only going to say this once. I know that even as I

tell you not to, you will. That's okay, but this is something you should aspire to follow more and more. Do not personalize the actions and deeds of your children.

Don't do it. When you do personalize what is being said or done, stop it. You don't get to be part of the walking wounded with your child. That's what you have a life partner, a friend, a minister, or a therapist for. Go to them and be wounded. Don't get me wrong, you're allowed to feel wounded, it's just that your child can't afford the luxury of you acting out your emotional wounds on him.

I know! I know! This is the most extreme example of something that's easier said than done. I promise you this will be the hardest tool for you to implement. Children don't play fair. They're experts at playing hard ball. And you're their most obvious targets.

Now when we were kids, we learned to play off other people's comments by retaliating with such gems as, "Sticks and stones may broke my bones but words will never hurt me." But hey, this is your child we're talking about. Your hurt is not so easily dismissed. You love them to death. You bust your ass to provide a life for them. You want only the best for them. You'd settle for the tiniest scrap of appreciation, but not only do you not get that, you get attacked for what you believe to be your best efforts.

Add to all of this the fact you've got this psychologist whispering in your ear, "Psst, turn the other cheek, they don't mean it the way it sounds, rise above the pain, you're the adult, forget your wounds, you have to be there for them." Yada, yada, yada.

Well, be angry with me. I wish I had something easier to offer you, but the truth of the matter is, sometimes

you're going to have to take a bullet for the good of the team. I'm advocating for your child right now. I'm telling you straight out, they can't afford for you to personalize their words and deeds.

I'm also telling you, the more able you are to make it safe for them to express their feelings, the less you'll have to cope with them acting out those feelings. Let me offer the following suggestions to make things just a little safer for them to express their feelings to you.

- It's okay to say that what they have said or done hurts you. It's not okay to hurt them back.
- It's okay to tell them their words and behavior are inappropriate. It's not okay to withdraw emotionally and physically because of their inappropriateness.
- It's okay to tell your child how their words and actions affect you. It's not okay to punish them for expressing those feelings.

I know what I'm asking of you is hard, but at the same time, what you and your child stand to gain by applying this tool is immense.

Bridge Builder's Tool



Honor rather than argue with your child's feelings.

"What do you mean, you don't want to try out for the basketball team?" Alan's dad asked in a ridiculing

tone.

Alan dug in. “I’m afraid to try out. I don’t want to put myself through all of that.”

“What kind of excuse is that?” his dad asked

“It’s no excuse. I’m telling you I’m afraid and that it’s not worth it to me.”

“When I was your age, I lived for the basketball season. I got so much out of being on the team. It taught me teamwork. It taught me how to compete—you know the thrill of victory and all that crap. And your mom, think how proud of you she’d be.”

“Dad, I don’t care about any of that stuff. That’s your life. What’s that have to do with my life?” Alan asked.

“It’s just that I always hoped that you would love playing ball as much as I did,” Dad said, wistfully.

“Dad, you’re not listening to me. None of that stuff interests me. Don’t you get it. I never liked sports. It was always you dragging me off to all the games. I never wanted to go.

“I’ve told you over and over how I feel about sports. I’m no good at them. All I do is get made fun of by the guys. I don’t want to play.”

“But, what about...”

“Dad, how about if you just let me not like sports, how about that?” Alan said as he stormed from the room.

Alan’s dad would say that he only wants what’s best for Alan. Dad would say that he’s a better judge of that than Alan, after all Alan’s too young to know what’s best for him. Sadly, all Dad would have to do is take the time and listen. Sometimes, knowing what’s best for your children comes from being able to hear and more importantly honor the feelings your children express.

Don’t get argumentative with me just yet. I’m not saying you should raise your child based upon whatever feeling they happen to express at any moment. Keep your eye on the ball. What we’re doing is developing skills that will better able you to *enter the world of your child* in order to enrich that special emotional connection.

With that as a goal, honoring your child’s feelings is a sacred path to achieve that end. It’s easy enough to understand why that’s the case. Honoring your child’s feelings gives your child room to be themselves.

“So what?” you may be wondering to yourself. “What’s the big deal about them having room to be themselves? All I want is some peace and quiet. I don’t want my every word challenged.”

This can very easily become one of those win-win situations. By honoring your child’s feelings, she doesn’t have to fight you for the right to have them. Do you get what I mean? If she feels like it’s okay to be afraid of trying something new or that it’s okay to be adventuresome and try something new, she won’t have to fight you for the right to have those feelings about that experience. If you’re not trying to take away her fear or joy for risk-taking, then she doesn’t have to fight you to have them.

Make sense? In the story about Alan not wanting to play basketball, do you see how Alan has to fight his father to not have to like sports, more importantly, to not have to live his life like his father lives his life? Clearly, Alan’s father has his own agenda going for Alan. He has no interest whatsoever in Alan’s feelings and so therefore they clash.

Imagine what their relationship would be like if there were five other points of conflict just like the basketball

try out. Alan would feel unheard, misunderstood, resentful, and ultimately, rebellious. Dad would feel wounded. Dad would continue to pressure Alan. Alan would continue to resist Dad's pressure in obvious or subtle ways.

Now imagine what things would be like between the two if Dad let go of his agenda for Alan. Alan would feel validated, listened to, and honored. He would be able to feel and act more loving towards his father. Dad would be able to experience the joy of watching Alan grow into who he was meant to become, not shaped into what Dad wants Alan to be.

And the emotional connection between the two? Loving, caring, honoring. What about the conflict? Certainly minimized. Do you see how you can empower your child to be who they are and at the same time reap the benefits of a relationship that is grounded in your emotional connection?

Do you see how you both are winners when you honor your child's feelings rather than argue with them? This gift of acceptance will fuel your child's growth and development. Here are two steps to follow when honoring your child's feelings.

Step 1: Let go of your agenda for your child.

I hope this is obvious by now. Usually, when you find yourself arguing with your child's feelings, there's inevitably your agenda clashing with your child's agenda. Alan's dad wants Alan to follow in his footsteps—to play basketball just like his father did. Alan wants to be free of his father's expectations, so that he can pursue what interests him. If you're trying to force your agenda on your child, there's no way you can hear what's important to him.

Be aware of your own agendas. Keep them out of your discussions with your child. Remember the goal of communication with your child should be the art of creating understanding, not the act of coercive persuasion.

Step 2: Encourage your child.

I'm not talking about being a cheerleader. I'm talking about articulating an attitude towards your child about your child—an attitude free of judgment. Encouragement is the foundation for trust. Encouragement creates an environment of permission. It's the type of permission that conveys that it's okay to feel what you feel and be who you are.

Are you beginning to see the connection between encouraging your child to express their feelings and reducing some of the discord that exists between you and your child. The key to your child beginning to more freely express their feelings is creating an atmosphere of permission. Not personalizing your child's words and behaviors along with honoring your child's feelings is what gives your child permission to express their feelings. The more your child is able to express their feelings, the less they'll need to act them out with you. By alleviating the need to act out their feelings, you'll experience a less conflictual relationship with your child. The more you and your child express your feelings to each other, the stronger the emotional connection will be. That is the ultimate payoff for all the hard work that goes into creating an emotionally safe environment.

Expressing feelings rather than acting them out is an important release valve. However, it's not realistic to believe that this skill is the solution to all conflict between you and your child. In the next chapter, we'll discuss an

important relationship skill that will capitalize on your ability to enter then world of your child in order to start resolving the unresolved issues that exist between you and your child.

Bridge Builder's Checklist

How to make your relationship safe for your child to express rather than act out their feelings.

1. Do not withhold your feelings.
2. Do not ridicule your child's feelings.
3. Do not question your child's feelings.
4. Do not judge your child's feelings.
5. Do not argue with your child's feelings.
6. Make time to check in with your child.
7. Encourage your child to express their feelings.
8. Accept those feelings your child expresses.
9. Help your child understand what they're feeling.
10. Acknowledge the risk your child has taken in expressing his feelings to you.

List in the space below ways you can make it safe for your child to express rather than act out his feelings.
