

Chapter 8

*Putting* Out the Fires  
With Love and Understanding

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*The overall purpose of human communication  
is—should be—reconciliation.*

-M. Scott Peck

*I was recently* doing a radio interview about parenting, sharing my ideas about *entering the world of your child*. Quite honestly, the ideas I was championing were going down about as smooth as spoiled milk.

“Let’s go to Sal on the car phone,” said Ed Carney, the show’s host. “Sal, hi! You’re on the air with Dr. Frisch.”

The callers were looking for quick fixes to problems with their children whose roots had a lifetime to germinate. Sal was no exception.

“Dr. Frisch, I’m not concerned about this emotional connection, mumbo jumbo. I just want my boy to listen to me when I tell him to do something,” Sal belted out.

“How are things going for you and your son?” Ed asked.

“Right now, not well,” Sal admitted.

“What seems to be the problem?” Ed asked.

“It’s my boy. I swear, he gets this from his mother. He won’t listen. I can’t get him to do his chores around the house.”

“What are some of the things you’ve asked him to do?” Ed asked.

“The usual. Keep his room neat. Help clean the kitchen after dinner. Take the garbage out as needed. Keep the garage cleaned up on a regular basis. When he has friends over, he’s supposed to clean up the rec room after they’re done using it.”

“That sounds reasonable. So what’s the problem?” Ed asked.

“Every day, if it’s not one thing it’s another with this kid,” Sal said in a tone suggesting this should be obvious.

“Why do you suppose that is?” Ed asked.

“It’s like I said, he gets it from his mother. It’s part him being lazy and part him not wanting to listen to me.”

“Sal, this is Dr. Frisch. Can you give me an example of how he ‘just doesn’t want to listen’ to you?” I asked.

“Sure, we’ll battle for days about his room—how it’s such a mess—then he’ll keep it clean for awhile,” Sal said.

“There you go, it sounds like a little persistence and a booming voice is all it takes,” Ed observed.

“You would think so, but, you can write a book on this. If he starts keeping his room clean, then all of a sudden I’m getting calls from school informing me he’s not keeping up with his assignments. Or if everything’s going alright at school, then his chores around the house become the next battle ground.”

“That must be frustrating,” I said.

“Of course it is. I feel like a dog chasing its tail with this kid,” Sal said. “All I want is for him to show me a little respect and do what I say.”

“How do you react when he disobeys you?” I asked.

“It depends.”

“Depends on what?” I asked Sal.

“I don’t know. It depends on how pissed off he gets me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, encouraging Sal to be more specific.

“For instance, he wanted to have a bunch of his friends over a couple of months ago. I told him he could if he promised to clean up after they left. He swore that he would keep the place clean.

“During the evening, I must have reminded him at least five times to be sure to clean up after they were through in the basement.”

“And?” I asked.

“And... the next morning, I go downstairs to check up on things. I found food and bottles all over the place. It looked more like a garbage dump than my expensive finished basement.”

“So what did you do?”

“I showed him that if he wasn’t going to listen to me, I could get plenty tough with him. I grounded him for a month. No leaving the house except to go to school.”

“How well did that work?”

“No friends, no mess. It worked great,” Sal said.

“Great! You solved your problems!” Ed said.

“Not completely. The whole month he was grounded, I couldn’t get him to do anything around the house. So, I told him if he didn’t shape up, there would be no driver’s license next spring. You see, Doctor, you just got to know where your kid’s soft spot is.”

“That must have straightened things out,” Ed said.

“Not exactly. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. The next thing you know, the principle’s calling to tell me he’s cutting class.

Ed joined in, “Doctor, isn’t this a case where tough love comes into play? Doesn’t Sal have to assert his authority with his son? You know, if you give him an inch he’ll take a mile, that whole routine. Afterall, you can’t have his son walking all over Sal.”

I turned my attention to Sal. “Have you talked to your son about the problem the two of you are having?”

“That’s just it. It doesn’t seem to be a problem for him. In fact, I think he enjoys seeing me get worked up.”

“What does he say when you ask him about it?” I asked.

“Oh, the usual adolescent crap about him not respecting me because I don’t respect him,” Sal said.

“What do you suppose he means by that?” I asked.

“Who knows with this kid! Believe me, whatever he says, it goes in one ear and out the other.”

“Sal, do you think that there’s anything he has to say that you need to hear?”

“Doctor, this kid is the world’s biggest victim. He whines about how I’m always on his back, I don’t appreciate him, all I ever notice are the things he doesn’t do, I never give him credit for what he does do. Hey, if he just did his chores, I wouldn’t have to be on his back at all.

Ed interrupted. “That’s what I mean, Doctor. Don’t you think children need to take more responsibility for their actions? There’s too much coddling taking place. In this day and age, what parent has the time to spend constantly talking things out with their children?”

“The same parent that spends too much time trying to undo all the problems their kids get into because the parent hasn’t made the time to create a strong emotional connection with their child,” I suggested.

I turned my attention back to Sal. “Sal, has it occurred to you that perhaps you and your son aren’t really arguing over cutting class, unkept bedrooms or dirty rec rooms?”

“Of course we are. If you’d like, you can come over tonight and watch, because I got another call from school today,” Sal said.

“Well, of course you’re right. All the ways your son blows off his responsibilities is the battle ground on which you and your son wage war with each other. But that doesn’t sound like that’s the root of your problem?”

“You’ve lost me, Doctor,” Ed said.

“Sal, here, has mastered the art of fixing problems between him and his son, but he hasn’t found a way to resolve the issues that exist between the two of them.

“Ed, you suggest that the solution is to get tougher. Sal seems to think that might makes right. I’ll ask the both of you, how well is that tact working?”

“I’m suggesting to the both of you that your strategies seems to stirs things up more than calm things down. Sal can threaten his son. He can ground him. He can even make deals with him. But the point of the matter is nothing seems to get resolved, their problem just reappears in another area of his son’s life.

“Oh, great. So you’re making me out to be the bad guy! Leave it to you psychologists. Always blaming the parent!” Sal said defensively.

“Sal, I don’t mean to blame you. I do mean to say that fixing a problem isn’t the same as resolving an issue.

“Sure, the problems at school and home are very real. No you’re not the cause of those problems. Yes, you’re son needs to act more responsibly. But I wonder if all of these incidents are just a smoke screen for an unacknowledged problem that you and your son need to resolve.

“And just what might that be?” Sal sneered.

“I don’t know for sure, but from what little you have told me, it sounds like your son feels like you don’t appreciate him and you feel like your son doesn’t respect you. It’s likely that until you get those two issues straightened out, you’ll continue to keep bouncing from one problem to the next with your son, fixing problems but never resolving issues.”

Temporarily fixing problems but never ultimately

resolving issues. It’s the bane of our existence. The never ending swirl of conflict without any end in sight. Every time one point of contention is ironed out, two new points of contention pop up. More times than not each point of conflict is more similar than dissimilar.

Nothing’s more toxic to your emotional connection with your child than unresolved conflict. No greater barrier can be erected than all the unspoken resentment and hurt that appears whenever there are unresolved issues between two people.

Believe me, I know how hard it is. Conflict’s such a painful, frustrating experience to endure. It undermines your patience and understanding. You desperately search for ways to end the battle. Not one of you has escaped the futility of feeling powerless, even defeated by your child. Eventually worn down, at some point, all you really want is some peace and quiet. A quick fix becomes a lifesaver for your frazzled nerves. Your search for solutions eventually gives way to anger, frustration, and hurt. You know what that inevitably leads to—entrenched positions, empty threats, eventually, some sort of punitive action.

But here’s the dirty truth about conflict. It’s a necessary thing between parent and child. Conflict is the inevitable outcome of your child growing, evolving, asserting their personhood, eventually separating from you. Let’s not label the presence of conflict as a problem in need of a solution. It’s a normal part of raising a child. To search for ways to eliminate conflict is unwarranted.

Eliminating conflict is not a solution. Knowing how to resolve conflict—that’s a gift sent from above. There’s no avoiding conflict, but there’s no need to get trapped in a vicious cycle like our friend Sal.

Sal's desperate for an end to the ongoing battle with his son. However, it seems that every move each makes towards the other does one thing and one thing only—it fuels the fire, fans the flames, and perpetuates the discord.

There's a way out of this trap, a simple skill that will enable Sal and his son to step out of the rut caused by their attempts to defeat each other. Just how can you stop investing your energy in fixing problems so that you might begin to resolve conflict with your child? We go back to the process of entering the world of your child. Being able to understand and appreciate what your child is experiencing will enable you to apply a special process of resolution. Once you're able to see your child through their eyes and ears, then you can begin to let go of the need to merely fix a problem. For once you've entered the world of your child, you'll be able to use a very potent skill I refer to as *pinpointing the issue*.

What is pinpointing the issue, more importantly how do you do it? It starts by accepting one basic premise about conflict. Most of the conflict that exists between two people has two levels to it, not just one. What are these two levels of conflict? The first level is the precipitating event of the conflict, what I refer to as the circumstance. For instance, what might be the circumstance(s) of the conflict between Sal and his child? That's right! Not cleaning his room, getting into trouble at school, not cleaning the rec room after his friends come to visit.

The circumstance or event is the level in which most of us invest much of our time and energy—that is trying to solve a problem without resolving the relationship issues. You saw it happen to Sal and his son. He bargained with his son. Then threatened his son. Eventually, Sal

punished him. But their problems never went away, they just shifted to different venues That's why acknowledging the second level of conflict is so important.

I refer to the second level as the underlying relationship issue. The underlying relationship issue is an issue hidden beneath the surface of the event or circumstance that precipitates an argument. The relationship between the circumstance precipitating the conflict and the underlying relationship issue is like the saying about a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing. The underlying relationship issue is the wolf, it's simply dressed in sheep's clothing—the circumstance, so that it may better hide its presence.

These unacknowledged relationship issues are what keeps conflict with your child inflamed. Just what are the underlying relationship issues? You can generally count on at least one of these four issues or any combination of them being embedded in much of the conflict that remains unresolved between you and your child. The themes are: 1) either one or both of you feeling unaccepted by the other; 2) either one or both of you experiencing unmet emotional needs; 3) either one or both of you feeling unappreciated by the other; 4) either one or both of you feeling controlled by the other. For a more detailed explanation of each of these issues and how to disentangle yourself from them, I would encourage you to read my book, *Making Molehills Out of Mountains: Reclaiming Your Personal Power In Your Relationships*.

Why, you might be wondering, should you care whether there are different levels to the conflict you experience with your child? Afterall, you might be thinking to yourself, all I want is for my child to listen to me, to not talk back to me, to do as I tell him to do, to get good

grades in school, and to keep out of trouble.

Here's what's in it for you. Focusing your problem-solving efforts on both levels will enable you to more effectively resolve the conflict that arises between you and your child. The reason Sal feels like a dog chasing its tail is because Sal only deals with the problem or circumstance; never does he address both levels with his son. Until Sal addresses both levels of the conflict, his son not doing the chores being one level, and his son feeling unappreciated by Sal the second level, it's likely they'll remain stuck in the vicious cycle they're currently in.

Let's look at Sal's plight to see how he might apply this new skill. If Sal were to choose to pinpoint the issue with his son, he would begin to transform the way conflict gets played out between the two of them. Instead of trying to defeat his son by punishing and belittling him, he could choose to identify both levels present in the conflict with his son and leave his child's dignity honored.

Step one is simply identifying that there's more going on here than a child's misbehavior. For Sal and his son those two levels would be: 1) his son not doing his chores; 2) both Sal and his son feeling disrespected and unappreciated by each other. Once Sal identifies both levels, he has a choice about which level to direct his focus. He can choose to escalate the problem by punishing his son or resolve the situation by mutually exploring ways to restore respect and appreciation to their relationship.

Don't get me wrong. Sal is entitled to what he wants from his son and vice versa. They're just going after it in the wrong way. They each want respect and appreciation. Sadly, they've turned their quest for respect and appreciation into a duel of who can defeat whom.

Now do you see how pinpointing the issue can create a win-win situation? If Sal and his son agree to focus on both levels of their discord, then and only then will his son begin to become more cooperative with Sal. It's also likely that Sal will begin to act in a more appreciative fashion towards his son. What I can guarantee you is if they leave their underlying issues unacknowledged, left to smolder and fester, those very issues will sabotage every effort either of them makes at changing their relationship.

Are you beginning to catch on to the power of pinpointing the issue? Can you see how addressing only the problem without acknowledging the underlying relationship issue will sabotage your efforts to maintain an emotional connection with your child? Can you think of the times, much like Sal, that you spend spinning in circles with your child, focusing only on the surface level discord? Can you see how those conflicts have remained unresolved because you focus solely on the surface level without addressing the issues that lurk beneath?

Let's take a moment and practice identifying the two levels of conflict by looking at the following scenarios.

## **Control Scenario**

"Why do I have to be home by ten?" Ron asked his father.

"I told you, until you prove to me that you can be more responsible about getting in at a decent hour, you're going to stick to my curfew, not yours!"

"Dad, I promise, I've learned my lesson. I won't come home late anymore."

"Ron, I promise you, I've learned my lesson too. You

won't be coming home late anymore, because I learned after that homecoming party, you're not to be trusted."

*The circumstance:* Disagreeing over how late Ron can stay out.

*The underlying relationship issue:* Control, trust and personal responsibility for Ron's words matching his actions about how late he is going to stay out.

*Possible actions to shift focus from problem to underlying relationship issue:*

1. Discuss how Ron's misbehavior affected father.
2. Discuss ways Ron can regain father's trust.
3. Discuss how father's mistrust affects Ron.
4. Find new solutions that honor father's concern and enable Ron to begin behaving more responsibly.

How would you shift the focus from the problem to the underlying relationship issue?

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## Appreciation Scenario

"What do you mean, 'what's with this C?' Didn't you notice the eight A's I got?" Laurie asked her mother.

"Yes, but I still want an explanation for this C," her mother said.

"There's just no pleasing you. Do you have any idea how hard I worked to get these grades?" Laurie replied.

"I do, but do you have any idea how hard you're

going to have to work to bring that C up to an A?" mom asked, ending the discussion.

*The circumstance:* Laurie's mom asks for an explanation for the C Laurie got on her report card.

*The underlying relationship issue:* Laurie feels unappreciated for her overall effort.

*Possible actions to shift focus from problem to underlying relationship issue:*

1. Mother can express appreciation for Laurie's overall effort.
2. Mother can acknowledge Laurie's hurt feelings.
3. Laurie can express how she is affected by her mother's attitude.

How would you shift the focus from the problem to the underlying relationship issue?

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## Acceptance Scenario

"You already look ridiculous with that hair cut. Now you want to get your nose pierced? Over my dead body! No daughter of mine is going around with something sticking out of her nose." Robin's father said.

"Why Dad? Am I going to somehow be any less your daughter?"

"No! That's not it at all."

"Well, then what is it? Am I an embarrassment to

you?” Robin asked.

“I just don’t want you looking like some wild person in a rock video. That’s not how I’ve raised you to be.”

“Dad, do you know how judgmental you are. I’m still your daughter, no matter what I look like. You mean you can’t accept me for who I am, even if I look different than you want me to appear?”

*The circumstance:* Robin and her father are arguing over whether Robin can pierce her nose.

*The underlying relationship issue:* Robin feels like her father is judging her appearance and doesn’t accept her unless she looks like he wants her to look.

*Possible actions to shift focus from problem to underlying relationship issue:*

1. Dad can work at understanding Robin rather than ridiculing her.
2. Dad can discuss his discomfort with Robin’s appearance.
3. Robin can tell Dad how it feels to be judged by him.

How would you shift the focus from the problem to the underlying relationship issue?

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## Emotional Needs Scenario

“But Mom, you don’t understand. You always take Margaret’s side,” Tom said.

“Oh, I understand plenty. You’re always taunting your sister. I want you to stop it or there will be no movies for you tonight,” Mom said.

“Mom, did you ever stop to consider that for once your angel Margaret is to blame? Can’t you just once listen to my side before making up your mind?” Tom asked.

*The circumstance:* Mom disciplining Tom for harassing his sister, Margaret.

*The underlying relationship issue:* Unmet emotional needs. Tom feels like mom judges him without hearing him out. Tom feels like he’s being treated unfairly. Tom feels like he wants mom to be on his side.

*Possible actions to shift focus from problem to underlying relationship issue:*

1. Mother can listen to rather than threaten Tom.
2. Mother can explore both sides of the dispute between Tom and Margaret.

How would you shift the focus from the problem to the underlying relationship issue?

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Let’s recap pinpointing the issue one last time: 1) recognize that there are two levels to most relationship discord; 2) distinguish between the two levels which are the specific circumstance that precipitated the discord with your partner and the underlying relationship issue that is embedded in the event or circumstance; 3) recognize that you have a choice whether to stay stuck in trying to fix the

never ending circumstance or resolve the unexpressed underlying relationship issue.

That's the process of pinpointing the issue. Now, let's make this skill relevant to your life. Think about the conflicts you're currently experiencing or have experienced with your child. See if you can identify the two levels to the conflict. First identify the circumstance to at least three different conflicts that you've had with your child.

Now, for each circumstance, see if you can identify at least one underlying theme of an unacknowledged issue.

Next, for each circumstance and the accompanying underlying theme, write down how you may have tried to fix the problem but not resolved the issue.

Finally, write down for each circumstance you initially identified how you can transform conflict from a duel of you and your child trying to defeat each other into an opportunity for the two of you to understand each other.

What we've discussed in the last two chapters are a powerful one-two punch for defusing much of the discord that inevitably erupts between you and your child. Giving your child permission to express their feelings rather than act them out accomplishes two things. First, reducing the number of times your child acts out their feelings will lessen the conflict between you and your child. Second, encouraging your child to express their feelings will make it much easier for the two of you to pinpoint the issue when the two of you become entwined in the web of disagreements and unresolved conflict.

I know how frustrating it can be for you. I know how tempting it is to lean on your parental power rather than slowly, methodically work through things. But I promise you, you'll begin to notice that the more you use these

tools of resolution, the less you'll need them. In my mind, that's a paradoxical solution worth learning.

## Bridge Builder's Checklist



*How to resolve issues rather than merely fix problems.*

1. Shift focus from fixing problems to identifying relationship issue(s).
2. Describe the specific behavior that is creating the problem.
3. Acknowledge how child's behavior affects you.
4. Give child opportunity to voice their concerns with your actions towards them.
5. You and your child together create a solution that will bring about desired change in behavior.
6. Set a date and time when you can check in with each other to see how well both of your concerns are being addressed.
7. Discuss any necessary mid-course corrections that may be needed when you check in with each other.
8. Repeat the process of checking in and making mid-course corrections.

List action steps you can take to begin resolving issues rather than only fixing problems.

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