

Chapter 9

*T*ools of Understanding

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*Let us open up our natures, throw wide the doors of
our hearts and let in the sunshine of good will
and kindness.*

-O. S. Marden

Are you beginning to see how easy it can be? Have you begun to discover the wonder of who your child is? Just remember, the key that will unlock your child's world is emotional safety. The safer you make it for your child to let you in, the more comfortable your child will feel opening up to you.

Before we finish, I have a few more tools for you to try. Think of them as extra choices. My intention is not to overwhelm you, but to give you some other ideas to help you in a pinch.

I hope I have challenged you to think about how you interact with your child. Hopefully, a resolve to do some things differently has arisen out of your own self-examination. But it takes more than a book and your resolve to create those changes. It takes courage to try something new. I don't question for a moment that you have that courage. I don't doubt you'll rely upon your courage to get you through the many challenges that await you.

Rest assured, a level of comfort awaits you. And the more comfortable you become with these tools, the more connected you'll feel to your child. As a result of this magical connection, a whole new world will open to you.

Don't forget, your child will learn from you. Your growing comfort will instill confidence in them to experiment with their relationship with you and others. After all, that's what this is all about—enriching your relationship with your child so that they can develop confidence in who they're becoming.

Bridge Builder's Tool



Speak without offending and listen without defending.

This is an important key to entering the world of your child—listening rather than defending. If you're defending yourself, you can't possibly be available to your child and it's unlikely that your child will feel safe with you. That's why this tool is so important. Embracing its spirit will set the tone for how safe your child feels with you.

It makes sense, doesn't it, that the less defensive you act towards your child, the less offensive they'll act towards you? Without a respectful attitude towards one another, there's no way either of you is going to feel cooperative towards one another. I hope you've come to realize by now that *entering the world of your child* can only take place in an environment of cooperation.

The only way I know to create a climate of respect and cooperation is to be able to communicate in an open, non-defensive manner. Thus, it's important that you're in a place emotionally to build a bridge of understanding rather than launch an assault.

You may be wondering about what to do with the feelings you experience when your child provokes you. Be clear about what I'm telling you. I'm not saying that you can't be, don't deserve to be, aren't entitled to be angry, hurt, enraged, resentful or any combination of emotions with your child. I'm simply saying that communicating with your child, whatever your emotional state is, must be

done in a spirit of cooperation, not retaliation. That makes sense, doesn't it? Anger is the energy by which you make a mountain out of a molehill. Cooperation is the energy by which you make a molehill out of a mountain.

So, what's the practical application to this? Don't communicate with your child when you're feeling frustrated or angry. If you or your child are feeling too angry to constructively explore an issue between the two of you, put things on hold until you're able to hear each other rather than talk at each other.

If you are momentarily stung by your child's words or actions, wait until you can better talk to them in a manner that enables you to help the situation. It's okay to take some time to defuse your emotions.

Don't believe that the heat of the moment is the time to make everything right. Walk away. Cool off. Think things through. Focus on all that you have learned. Ask yourself what the situation calls for. Speaking to their feelings? Validating their experience? Setting appropriate limits. Pinpointing an issue?

I told you at the beginning there's no one rule of thumb that fits all situations. But don't lose sight of what I'm about to tell you. If you follow this tip, you won't go wrong.

Bridge Builder's Tool



Focus on behavior, not personality.

Please do not take this tool lightly. Make sure you understand the distinction I'm making between behavior and personality. There's who your child *is* and what your child *does*. Your child is not how they behave. It's important to bear that distinction in mind as you endure the inevitable ups and downs with your child.

How best to respond to your child as you distinguish between behavior and personality? Is it better to attack your child for who they are or express to them how their behavior affects you? For example:

Focus on Personality: "You spoiled brat, can't you for once clean up after yourself when you make a snack."

Focus on Behavior: "When I have to clean up after you in the kitchen, it makes me feel angry."

Is it better to belittle your child for their unique way of acting, thinking, and feeling or identify specific behaviors that are creating a problem for the two of you? For example:

Focus on Personality: Do you honestly believe you're going to get into college by reading comic books every night? Only an idiot would treat their future so lightly.

Focus on Behavior: We've had several discussions about your study habits. I want to help you do the best you can in school but I feel frustrated when you choose not to try.

Quite simply, do you believe that the formula for creating a safe emotional connection with your child should be predicated upon them changing who they are or what they do?

Isn't it more likely that your child will simply feel attacked, disapproved of, and unaccepted by you when you focus on those aspects of who they are rather than

addressing their specific behaviors? And if that's true, what reaction do you think you're likely inviting?

Anger, resentment, justification, blame, defensiveness. Now that seems pretty self-defeating, doesn't it? Focusing on your child's personality is like pouring gasoline on a fire. It merely escalates the level of conflict you're attempting to resolve in the first place. Just remember, if your child is busy defending himself from your attempts to change who he is, he'll never be able to listen long enough to begin to understand where you're coming from.

Behavior, on the other hand, is an easier pill to swallow. It's less personal, although it may still sting. But more importantly, behavior is something your child can more easily modify. Behavior is something your child has a choice about. It is an area of your child's life they have more direct conscious influence over. Focusing on your child's traits will lead to defensiveness whereas focusing on their behavior is less threatening.

Let's take a moment to see if you can identify how shifting the focus from personality to behavior might benefit you and your child. Write down at least three examples of how you have interacted with your child by focusing on their personality rather than their behavior.

In order to understand how you may be sabotaging the emotional connection you work so hard to establish,

it's important to have an appreciation for how focusing on your child's personality affects them. Take some time and think about the following two questions. How does your child feel in each case you listed above?

Now, how does your child react to you when they are made to feel that way?

In each example you listed, how can you shift from focusing on your child's personality to their behavior?

Focusing on your child's personality is a short-sighted solution to a long-term problem. On the other hand, focusing on your child's behavior is a long-term solution that enriches the well-being of your relationship. Living the spirit of this tip will go a long way towards relieving much of the tension between you and your child. More importantly, focusing solely on your child's behavior will restore respect, elevate trust, and enhance good-will between the two of you.

Bridge Builder's Tool



Normalize your child's feelings.

Two men were talking in a bar after work. "I don't know how to make her understand," one man said to the other. "She doesn't get it. I told my daughter she was goofy for feeling hurt. I mean, so, I forgot her fourteenth birthday, but I told her she's gotta see things from my point of view."

"But her birthday? How could you forget her birthday?" his friend asked.

"I didn't really forget it. I've been busy at work. Things have been crazy. So I got tied up and couldn't get away. But she went ballistic on me."

"Maybe she just doesn't understand your work situation. Why not try to explain it to her," his friend said.

That night the man tried to *explain* things to his daughter. He spent a long time telling her all the demands he's had to deal with at work.

When he stopped talking, his daughter didn't feel one bit better. She was in no mood for his lame excuses. After all, it was her birthday he had missed. Yet, he didn't even try to understand why she was feeling so upset.

"What's wrong? I'm telling you the truth."

"My feelings don't care about whether or not you were working," she said. "Tell me you're sorry, don't tell me that I'm crazy to be feeling the way I'm feeling."

Can you see what was most upsetting for the man's

daughter in this story? Sure, she was upset that her father blew her off on her birthday. But, more upsetting to her than missing the celebration was his attempt to convince her there was nothing to be upset about.

Yet, aren't her feelings perfectly appropriate considering the circumstances? It's perfectly appropriate to be upset about a missed birthday, no matter the justification. However, her father, in attempting to stop her daughter from feeling hurt, stepped all over her hurt feelings.

Instead of explaining away his behavior and trying to talk her out of her feelings, how do you think his daughter would feel if he just let her be disappointed and hurt? How would his daughter feel if he just acknowledged the importance of her birthday and how disappointed she was by things getting all messed up?

That's what normalizing feelings is all about. Just letting people be where they're at emotionally. Not trying to move them out of their feelings because it makes you feel comfortable. This is much like validating, isn't it? Normalizing feelings is a form of validating a person's feelings. You can see how important this would be to your child.

As I said earlier, part of your job is to help clarify for your child what it is they're feeling. That's very different than telling them whether they are right or wrong for having those feelings.

What we're talking about here is merely getting out of the way long enough to let your child feel whatever it is that they're feeling. How best to get out of the way? Don't talk them out of what they're feeling! Don't explain away their feelings. Don't demonstrate how they're wrong for feeling what they're feeling.

Just listen! Acknowledge their feelings. Be there to understand what they're feeling. Let them know their feelings are okay.

Remember, the goal is just to normalize what your child is feeling. We do this by enforcing the fact that whatever your child is feeling is appropriate, whether or not their feelings fit your version of the facts.

Scenario #1

"But you said we could go to the movies after I cleaned up my room. It's not fair," Billy shrieked.

"I know I did, but I'm tired. You'll just have to wait until tomorrow," Dad said.

"I don't want to wait. You said we could go today," Billy said.

"You're just going have to get used to being disappointed by people. It's going to happen to you all the time," Dad said.

"But Dad, you said we could go if I cleaned up my room," Billy said.

"And now I'm telling you we can't go. You know young man, I wouldn't be acting so high and mighty if I were you. You break promises all the time," Dad said.

"But Daaaad..."

"Stop your whining right now! I told you we'll go tomorrow. That's just going have to be good enough for you! Now stop your complaining or you won't be going anywhere for a long time."

What do you notice about Dad's attitude towards Billy's feelings in this first scenario? Does he normalize

Billy's feelings or try to talk Billy out of his feelings? How does he try to talk Billy out of his feelings?

How do you think Billy feels when Dad tries to talk Billy out of what he's feeling?

Now let's take a look at the same scenario, done a little differently.

Scenario #2

"But you said we could go to the movies after I cleaned up my room. It's not fair," Billy shrieked.

"I know I did, but I'm tired. You'll just have to wait until tomorrow," Dad said.

"I don't want to wait. You said we could go today," Billy shouted.

"You're right. I broke my promise to you. You have every reason to be angry with me," Dad said.

"I know it doesn't seem fair. I know you wanted to go to the movies and you did everything I asked of you. It does matter to me that I've hurt your feelings, but I'm just too tired," Dad said.

"But Dad, you told me I should never break my promises."

"Billy I'm glad you listened to me. I'm not setting a very good example for you, am I?"

"No you're not, Dad."

"I wish there was more I could say to you. You have every right to be angry with me. But saying it doesn't

make it any better, does it?”

What do you notice about Dad’s attitude towards Billy’s feelings in the second scenario? Does he normalize or try to talk Billy out of his feelings? How does he normalize Billy’s feelings?

How do you think Billy feels when Dad normalizes what Billy is feeling?

Bridge Builder’s Tool



Encouragement elevates the emotional world of your child.

Do you ever take the time to think about how much negativity each and everyone of us experiences day in and day out? Do you ever stop to think about the impact of that negativity on our will to risk and grow? Have you ever considered how magical a dose of encouragement can be? Do you have any idea how much you can empower your child just by your encouragement?

I was at my friend’s bar one night when I overheard the following conversation that illustrates just how much we need encouragement and how our emotional battery is drained when we don’t have it in our lives.

One man turned to the other and said. “Are you still dating that Barb?”

“Yes,” his friend replied.

“She’s no good for you,” he said.

“What?”

“I don’t think you should see her,” his friend reiterated. “You always pick the wrong woman. This one’s just like all the rest. She’s no good. I can see it now, this is going to end up like the last goofy relationship—one big mess. In fact, it’ll probably be more like a train wreck than a relationship.”

The first man sat in confusion thinking about his friend’s comments. Eventually, he spoke. “You don’t know anything about her. You don’t even know how I feel about her.

“It would be nice if you took my side for once. I hate when you undermine me like this. Do you know how confused I get when I do one thing and you tell me to do it another way? How about just this one time you focus on your side of the street and leave mine alone!”

“I pick on your choices because you keep making bad decisions,” his friend responded.

“It’s time you start letting me make my own choices!” the first man said. “I’m tired of always doing what you think I should do. Just this once I wish you could support my choices rather than poke holes in them.”

There are so many risks your child will take in their lifetime. So many new situations await their eager souls.

Although they'll approach these situations with a mixture of fear and wonderment, the attitude you communicate to them about how capable they are will make all the difference in the world to them.

Don't lose sight of just how influential your words can be. Believing in them will make all the difference in the world as to how they think of themselves. How they think about themselves will set the stage for how comfortable they'll be to explore their world. You know as well as I do that their comfort level with taking risks has a lot to do with their emotional well-being. So the next time you have an opportunity, be sure to offer a word of encouragement rather than create a climate of defeat.

Well there you have it. Throughout this book, I have shared with you many of the tools I teach everyday in my private practice to people just like you. Some of these tools work better than others. Some of these tools suit one individual more so than others. What I can tell you with great assuredness is not what tool will work best for you, but what enables any of them to work at all.

The secret ingredient is you. Your courage. Your love. Your compassion for yourself and your child. Your child is blessed to have you for a parent. Not everyone is willing to roll their sleeves up and do the dirty work. That's the key to entering the world of your child—doing the work, day after day. As I said at the beginning of this book, your child's emotional development never takes a day off.

I know how sincere you are. I believe you want the best for your child. I hope this book can serve as a vehicle to gift your child with all of who you can be. Your child deserves it. And so do you!