

Dealing with Feelings or Problems

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Dealing with Feelings (or Problems)

Nonsupportive responses to children's feelings and problems:

Responses that attempt to make the feelings go away

Dynamic: Protects children from their feelings; or protects adults who are uncomfortable with children's feelings.

Outcomes: Child's self-doubt, confusion; need to "stuff" feelings; feelings not OK.

- **Dismissing/Minimizing**
"That's nothing to be upset over." "That doesn't mean anything." "So she called you a camel. Big deal!"
- **Excusing**
"She didn't mean it." "He didn't know what he was saying." "She must be having a bad day." "Well, you know, her parents are going through a divorce."
- **Denying**
"Oh, you don't really feel that way." "There's no such thing as monsters." "People shouldn't hate their brothers."
- **Distracting**
"But you're so good in your other subjects." "Things could be worse." "You're lucky you have a brother." "You think you've got problems." "But his parents are so nice." "Cheer up! This is the best time in your life!"
- **Medicating**
Uses some type of substance (usually food) or activity (schoolwork, TV, chores, shopping) to distract children from their feelings: *"Just get busy."*

Responses that make the child wrong for having feelings

Dynamic: Serves as outlet for adult's anger, impatience, frustration, or feelings of inadequacy or shame triggered by child's feelings.

Outcome: Shame/wrongness; defensiveness; feelings not OK.

- **Attacking/Shaming**
"I told you this would happen!" "Don't be a sissy." "You're so ungrateful!" "Nice boys don't hate their sisters." "You're just too sensitive." "How could you be so stupid!"
- **Blaming**
"What did you do to her?" "Well, if you had just studied!" "Of course it died! You never changed the water!" "That's what happens when you overeat."
- **Challenging**
"Why does that bother you?" (requires child to defend feelings, convincing adult that the feelings are legitimate/getting adult's approval for feelings)

- **Enmeshing**
“Well I never had a problem with math.” “So now you know how I feel.” “Your problems really give me a headache.” “That wouldn’t bother me.”

Responses that attempt to fix it or make it better

Dynamic: Makes adult responsible for child’s problems, allows adult to feel important.

Outcome: Reduced sense of responsibility for problems (for child); lack of confidence in problem-solving abilities; helplessness; using feelings to get “rescued”

- **Commiserating**
“Ain’t it awful.” “Well, he’s a jerk anyway.” “You don’t need her anyway.” “You’re so unlucky!” (Unlike validating, commiserating can imply a certain amount of powerlessness or victimhood. It is not supportive or particularly comforting and rarely what the person wants to hear.)
- **Rescuing**
“Here. Let me see those math problems.” “OK. You can have the car again next weekend if you have a good enough excuse for breaking curfew.” “Look, I’ll talk to your teacher about it.” “That’s OK. I’ll pay those insurance premiums.”
- **Advising**
“Go study and you won’t feel so scared about that test.” “Tell her how you feel.” “You know if you cut your hair and lost five pounds you wouldn’t feel that way.” “Just ignore her.”

Creating a Safe Emotional Environment

- Remember that it’s OK for children to have feelings without explaining or defending them.
- Feelings are not behaviors. Feelings are never right or wrong, but behaviors that hurt other people are not OK. Adults do not need to protect other people from a child’s feelings, but they may need to intervene in hurtful behaviors.
- It’s OK to express feelings as long as doing so does not hurt anyone or create problems for others.
- Most children (and many adults) do not have healthy, non-hurtful outlets for expressing their feelings, especially anger or frustration. In a non-conflict time, discuss and present options available to help kids “externalize” their feelings without hurting themselves or others. (Ex: Having a stuffed animal or picture they can talk to when you’re not available. Being able to draw a picture or write a letter about how they’re feeling—and then tearing it up! Going for a run, hitting a pillow, tearing up paper, or going down the hall for a drink of water and a chance to catch their breath!)
- Adults and children are distinct, separate individuals. It is not necessary to own someone’s feelings or problems to show that person love.
- Adults are not responsible for changing or controlling the child’s feelings. It’s more loving and supportive to communicate that a child’s feelings are heard, respected, and taken seriously—even when you don’t understand them.

- Children learn to deal with feelings more effectively when they don't have to "stuff" or hide them to protect a critical, guilt-ridden, or over-reacting adult.
- Responses that interfere with children's ability to own, feel, or process their feelings can block communications, teach children to mistrust their own feelings and perceptions, and interfere with the development of their problem-solving capabilities.

Supportive Alternatives for Dealing with Other People's Problems and Feelings

- **Get clear on your role**
Are we there to protect children or to teach children to protect and defend themselves; to give solutions or to help them find their own?
- **Listen**
Maintain eye contact, with minimal or no talking
- **Distinguish between feelings and behaviors**
There's a difference between wanting to hurt someone and actually hurting someone. Feelings are never right or wrong.
- **Accept**
Avoid judgmental, shocked, disappointed words, looks, body language. Avoid making others wrong for their feelings.
- **Validate**
Support the other person's right to his or her feelings. Offer words or non-verbal assurances that gives children permission to have feelings.
- **Maintain your boundaries**
Let kids know when you'll be available. Watch the tendency to take responsibility for the child's feelings or problems by trying to fix the situation, cheer them up (fix them), or by rescuing or advising.
- **Provide and encourage healthy, non-hurtful outlets for feelings (and meeting needs)**
- **Ask—don't tell**
This is for problem-solving rather than dealing with affective states—two different situations, each of which requires different behaviors. Once the emotional crisis has passed and the child is ready to access the part of the brain that deals with cognitive functions, help him find solutions to his own problems, think about options available, anticipate probable outcomes. This process puts you in the role of facilitator or guide. A great alternative to advice-giving!
- **Model and teach conflict-management**
If necessary, model and teach conflict-management. Demonstrate non-destructive ways to have, express, and process feelings; express needs; set and maintain boundaries.
- **Leave the door open for future discussion.**

Adapted from Parents, Teens & Boundaries: How to Draw the Line, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. (Health Communications, Inc., 1993.) Also appears in Dr. Bluestein's latest book, The Win-Win Classroom: A Fresh and Positive Look at Classroom Management (Corwin Press, 2008).

Alternatives to Advice-Giving: Ask, Don't Tell

Sample Questions to Build Responsibility & Problem-Solving Skills

The questions that follow are provided to help with the mechanics of mastering the technique of “asking—not telling,” an effective alternative to giving kids advice that encourages independence and problem-solving competence. The questions are in no particular order and will neither be relevant nor appropriate for every child or situation you encounter. Read through the list for ideas and to “ground” yourself in the process. Use what works for you. Add to this list as you think of other questions or want to note ideas that work.

The purpose of these questions—and this process—is to allow you to put the responsibility for solving a particular problem on the child, almost like throwing a ball back to him, over and over, even though it will almost always seem easier to just catch the ball (the problem) and run with it yourself. Remember, you want to get a dialogue going, one in which your students do most of the talking and you do most of the listening. You want to help them get a better grip on what’s going on in a particular situation, and to determine what they want, which options are available (and won’t create additional problems) and what they’re ultimately going to try to make it better or make it right.

This process is only as good as your ability to listen and respond to what you’re hearing. Be careful that you don’t simply run down this list (or some other), bombarding your child with a series of questions. Please do not “drill” your students or get impatient to ask the next question. This is not a script and the questions are not the issue—*the process is!*

So next time one of your students trusts you enough to come to you with a problem, watch the tendency to offer solutions or advice. Try this process and watch how smart your students can be!

Adapted from a still-to-be-published booklet entitled Feelings & Problem-Solving, book 6 in a series entitled Proactive Parenting: Creating Great Relationships with Your Kids, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. (I.S.S. Publications, Albuquerque, NM.)

Some Sample Questions

What happened?
What would you like to happen next?
What do you think will (or might) happen next?
How do you think you’ll feel later (or afterwards)?
How would you feel if that happened to you?
What have you tried so far?
What’s worked for you in the past?
What else could you try?
What kind of back-up plans do you have if that doesn’t work?
What have you tried that’s worked with this person?
What have you tried that’s worked in similar situations?
What are you risking by doing that?
Is it worth it?
How can you take care of yourself in this situation?
How would you like him/her to treat you?
What do you plan to say?
What seems to work for the other kids?
If you had a magic wand, how would you make this turn out?
What do you think the other person wants?
What have you just agreed to?
Will that create any problems for you?
Will that create any problems for anyone?
What if you change your mind?
What else might you try?
What have you learned from this?
What are you going to do the next time you’re tempted to do that?
How are you going to avoid this problem in the future?
How are you going to prevent this problem in the future?
Is this helping?
How important is it for you to (pass this class, get the part, stay in this relationship, make the team. . .)?

What are you willing to do to (pass this class, get the part, stay in this relationship, make the team...)?
What will happen if you don't (pass this class, get the part, stay in this relationship, make the team...)?
How will you know if that's a good choice?
What would you have to do differently to make this work?
What are you willing to change?
How can you find out?
What questions do you have?
How do you think you might handle this the next time it occurs?
What do you wish you could say to this person?
Do you want the situation to change?
How do you want the situation to change?
Are you willing to consider other options?
What will you do the next time you run into him/her?
What does this person want you to do to make things right?
What might you propose as an alternative?
What will happen if you get caught?
Would you like to talk about it?
Would you like to talk to someone else about this?
Can you live with that?
What are you being blamed for?
What parts of this situation are beyond your control?
What parts of this situation are within your control (or influence)?
What are the limits (or criteria or deadlines) in this situation?
How much time do you need to decide?
What if you're OK the way you are?
What would that sound like?
How are you going to follow up on this?
When are you going to follow up on this?
What do you wish this other person would do?
If the situation doesn't change, how can you take care of yourself?
What bothers you the most about this situation?
What do you like best about this person?
Do you want to solve this problem?
Do you need more time to think about it?
Do you want me to leave you alone?

Problem Solving Strategies

- Deal with affect (emotional hijacking) first. Don't try to solve problems, or ask kids to solve problems when they're upset. (They can't access the cognitive parts of the brain until they calm down.)*
- Help student get rational. Breathing or relaxation exercises; walking or going to get a drink of water; Brain Gym (especially "Hook Ups") can help.
- Encourage Problem Solving: ASK—Don't Tell. (See examples at left.)
- Help student assume responsibility for solutions. This can not happen if we tell the students how to solve their problems.
- Help students explore options, possible outcomes (more questions).
- Model conflict prevention skills (good boundary-setting language; asking directly for what you want; not blaming or asking others (parents, principal, counselor) to solve your problems.

*Telling them to "Calm down" usually has the opposite effect!

Other questions:

How I will remember to ASK (or just LISTEN!) the next time I'm tempted to give advices

Ways to Improve the School's Social Culture

- Increase awareness, advocacy and a willingness to take *immediate, positive* action (regarding how kids treat one another).
- Use conflicts as opportunities to teach, build interactive skills and positive attitudes/beliefs about others (rather than simply punishing violators).
 - Build problem solving skills. (Ask, don't tell.)
 - Build social skills or friendship skills as needed.
- Build emotional intelligence, resilience, self-control.
- Model tolerance, respect (avoid double standards).
- Work to deglamorize and eliminate elitist status of certain students over others.
(Value *all* students, holding a wider range of possible contributions in high regard.)
 - Provide opportunities for service.

What's Wrong With "I- Messages"?

by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.

Description:

Formula for expressing feelings in conjunction with another person's behavior: "*When you _____, I feel _____ (and I want you to _____).*" in order to get the other person to act differently.

Problems:

- They are still "You" messages, literally (verbally) and energetically, carrying a message of blame: Your emotional state is the fault of someone else's behavior. ("Victim" talk.)
- They put the responsibility for your feelings and emotional well-being on someone else.
- They assume that the other person is invested in your emotional well being and would be willing to change his or her behavior to care-take you. This is especially not true of typical playground or hallway social dynamics.
- They give a great deal of power to someone who may not have your best interests at heart, someone who may, in fact, be hoping to cause you discomfort, embarrassment, inconvenience or pain.
- If someone's intention is, indeed, to hurt you, "I messages" tell that person that his or her strategies for doing so are effective and, in fact, working!
- Few child relationships have (or should have) the intimacy required for dealing with the emotional impact of behaviors—and such intimacy is neither necessary nor relevant for generating cooperative, respectful behavior.
- Kids who are willing to change their behavior so other people won't feel sad or angry often have a hard time making good decisions on their own behalf. Their behavior tends to be other-motivated and people-pleasing, patterns which carry their own dangers and risks.
- There are other, better ways to generate cooperation from others, regardless of their personal feelings for you

Alternatives:

- Dealing with confrontation by "agreeing" and changing the subject
- Requesting different behavior (or that a certain behavior stop): "*Please stop kicking my chair.*" "*I don't like that word. Please don't use it around me.*" "*Please don't touch the stuff on my desk.*" (No need to justify or explain why.)
- Stating a preference: "*I don't care to discuss that.*" (And then cheerfully change the subject, redirect discussion.)
- Set a boundary, using a promise with a positive consequence: "*I don't play with people who call me names.*" "*I don't date people who hit.*" "*I'll be happy to continue this discussion when you stop yelling at me.*"
- Simply refusing to engage or respond is also appropriate in some instances.

Free article on my Website, What's Wrong with "I-Messages"?: <http://janebluestein.com/2013/whats-wrong-with-i-messages/>

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