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## Ron Taffel: Visiting Scholar at Bank Street

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## **Ron Taffel: How to Communicate with Your Child**

For Bank Street March 14, 2012

For a variety of reasons, our culture places less emphasis on parent-child hierarchy than it used to. This has affected family life profoundly, moving it from an attitude that ‘children should be seen and not heard’ to one that values open communication between adults and kids. As a result, children from an early age on are way more articulate about their thoughts and feelings than previous generations. And they feel at liberty to express themselves to us just about whenever they feel like it. This is good and how most of us want it to be.

The ability of children to be more articulate than ever, though, does not necessarily mean they will be open with us about what truly matters. Nor can we rely on kids’ listening to our guidance merely because we are ‘the parents.’ So, how do we encourage children to talk to us about what is important—and be open to adult guidance? Here are the latest findings on better parent-child communication:

- 1) Think about it—the best discussions happen when you are in *parallel position* and not looking at each other—on a drive, taking a walk, playing a game, or lying next to your child at bedtime. Paradoxically, discussion is easiest when you are both in the middle of doing something else.
- 2) Every child has a different *conversational style*. Instead of fighting against it or trying to impose a way of talking on kids, notice when your child enjoys opening up the most, whether he likes being prompted by questions or not, what pace of conversation is comfortable, and how sensitive to tone she is.
- 3) *Build rituals* around your child’s conversational style. These are the moments that matter in childrearing, so do what you can to protect that time. Make yourself available and potentially focused, i.e., see if you can turn off technology and those inevitable 21st century interruptions. This need only be 10-15 minutes, so it’s actually doable. If you can’t be there when she normally likes to talk, then create natural times together: cook, have a catch, give the little one a bath, etc. Conversation will often bubble up.
- 4) Many kids say *bedtime* is their favorite time for talking. Why? Kids are often bored when they put their head down and wait for sleep. This is the first time all day that the 21st century’s world of constant stimulation is turned off. And our oh-so-interactive children often have trouble amusing and soothing themselves. So, don’t just read to them, but also tell stories about yourself, your life and history. This will quickly soothe your child or remind her of something that happened that day—which can

be the start of a great conversation. The bad news is that bedtime will take a little longer—the very good news is that you can talk to each other in a more relaxed, open way.

5) *Talking rituals can save lives.* The research shows that the more you have mealtimes with your child, the later he or she will become sexually active or engage in dangerous behavior in adolescence. Don't worry about what to serve, just make it an ongoing part of your lives. If you can't have regular mealtimes because of work demands, not to worry—go to the diner on the weekend, have a Sunday night dinner ritual, etc. Just set it up so it's predictable and becomes something you and your family can count on.

6) If you have a couple or several children, try to have one-on-one 'date nights.' This is a proven ritual that large families use: be with one child alone for 20 minutes at night, after school, or the weekend. Johnny on Tuesday, Jenny on Wednesday, and so on. When sibs take turns, you both will talk more easily.

## **Communication Dos and Don'ts**

### *First the **Don'ts**:*

Don't grill your children at dinnertime, don't pepper them with questions. *Talk about your own day* and your child may well chime in about his.

Don't *lecture*. This is one of the biggest conversation stoppers we do with our kids, but we often can't help ourselves. Try to.

Don't be too *judgmental*. Voice your values, your kids need to hear them—but try not to weigh your opinion down with holier-than-thou judgments. Twenty-first century kids are *allergic* to this.

Don't *interrupt*—we always do, time is short, kids' stories meander, and we've got places to go. But this is one of the biggest complaints children have.

The details matter to kids. So don't skip over them—those tiny details are often the doorway to what counts in kids' minds.

Don't 'fix it'—they're our children, so it's natural for us to want to make them feel better, but all it does is make kids stubbornly stick to the bad feelings. In fact, the same happens with adults.

Don't talk when you or your child is upset or the both of you are in one of your 'dances.' The research now proves what we already knew: nothing gets through in either direction when we're really upset.

Don't ask the question, 'Why?' Who really knows why we do what we do. And besides shutting conversation down, most often kids haven't got a clue.

Don't say anything *online* to your child that you wouldn't want to be public knowledge, because once you commit it to the web or a text it can 'go viral,' without your permission or even your knowledge.

Now for the **Dos**:

Watch yourself (your own nonverbal responses) and notice your child's reactions—tone, energy, eagerness to share, pacing. To paraphrase Yogi Berra, "You can see a lot just by observing."

Ask concrete action questions. "What happened next?" "Who was there?" "What were they wearing?" "What did they say?" "What did you say back?"

Respond like a *human being* so that your child can *feel* you. Kids need to have the sense of you as a real person with real (though not 'losing it') reactions. We aren't therapists. If he doesn't get a reaction from you he will go to a second family for a response—after all, the peer group is not shy.

Get your child to tell 'the story.' Our children learn written literacy—but they also need to learn how to develop emotional literacy, and this comes from being able to tell a story about what happened, hopefully with a beginning, a middle, and an end. (More or less—they are kids.)

Stay with the story. Do not immediately rush in with an *action plan*. You're a parent, not a project manager.

Give advice after the story has been told and you respond emotionally. To lessen stubbornness, use this introduction: "I know things are *totally different for you now than when I was growing up* (very true), but I remember when something sort of similar happened to me..."

Tell your child what you believe and what you might do, then ask her what she might do. Go back and forth, and be clear about your own values—if you won't, the second family of the peer group and pop culture will, for sure!

And finally, keep whatever you say *short*. Attention spans today are almost non-existent—know your audience.

***The myth that kids don't talk to parents as they get older just ain't necessarily so. Follow these guidelines and you will have a greater chance to keep the lines of communication open about what really matters in your child's life.***