Personal Workbook for

Ten Powerful Things to Say to Your Kids

Creating the relationship you want with the most important people in your life

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What kids hear us say

Twenty-some years ago, a class participant brought me a list ranking the thirty statements children hear most from adults.

1. No! (The answer most often heard)
2. Don't give me those excuses!
3. Let me put it another way.
4. I don't have time now; maybe later.
5. Do you think I'm made out of money?
6. Just wait until you have kids of your own.
7. What in the world do you think you are doing?
8. Don't eat a snack; dinner is almost ready.
9. Be nice to your little sister (brother) or else!
10. Clean your room.
11. When I was your age…
12. Are you lying to me?
13. Eat your dinner; there are children starving all over the world.
14. Can't you understand what I'm trying to tell you?
15. Can't you ever do (get) anything right?
16. Who do you think you are, anyway?
17. Why don't you grow up?
18. This is going to hurt me more than it will hurt you.
19. When are you ever going to learn?
20. Do it now!
21. Can't you kids get along with each other?
22. Why can't you be more like_____?
23. Go to your room!
24. Do your homework!
25. Don't use that tone of voice with me!
26. Shut up and listen to me!
27. You're not old enough to understand that yet.
28. Here, let me show you how to do it right.
29. I'm doing this for your own good.
30. Turn that radio down (off)!

Calvin: Sometimes when I'm talking, my words can't keep up with my thoughts. I wonder why we think faster than we speak.

Hobbes: Probably so we can think twice.

—Bill Watterson, creator of the *Calvin & Hobbes* comic strip

As this list indicates, negative comments often shape the conversations parents have with their kids. At first blush, you may be dismayed by how many of these statements you can remember saying to your own kids. That certainly doesn't mean there is something wrong with you or with how you're raising your children. My point is simply that there is profound benefit in becoming more aware of what you say to your kids. Awareness gives you the choice to say something else, and therein lies the power. Awareness creates the opportunity for different conversations—conversations that open the door to more special moments with your children.

Don't lose your insights!

Sometimes an insight is worth a life's experience.
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

One of the ways we can change our behavior is to have an insight and then work with that insight until it becomes a habit. Research about the brain has informed my thinking about this:

- We actually have insights frequently. Our minds are connection machines—continually taking thoughts stored in different parts of our brains and making a connection between those thoughts.
- Energy is released upon having an insight, which helps propel us into action to capitalize on the insights we have.
- The energy released that helps us get into action dissipates within a few hours, making it more likely that the insight itself will disappear. This increases the importance of capturing our insights before we lose them.
- It is easy to create new habits from our insights. It does require that we find ways to reinforce the insight by practicing.

This is useful information for most of us who might have been operating from the view that our insights automatically translate to new behavior.

Recently I exchanged some e-mail with a friend who is working on being a great mom for her teenage daughter and keeping track of her observations.

Here are several of Terri's recent insights:

- I'm finding out that parenting is more about what I learn about myself rather than what Ashley is supposed to do.
- I am realizing that how I see things is much different from the way Ashley does.
- I am learning to let her finish her thoughts before I jump in.
- She makes me rethink things—it gives her a sense of empowerment just to know that when she asks something, I don't immediately have an answer, but that I will think about it.

I love Terri's first insight. It reminds me that kids are not only reacting to us, but we are reacting to them. All relationships can be seen as a dance—one person leading and the other following—sometimes we initiate the conversation and other times we respond. The point is to not to fall into a way of reacting that isn't consistent with who we want to be in life.

These two notions, captured by the following questions, are compelling because they each provide another lens through which we can reflect upon our interactions with our kids:

- Where and how am I reacting to my children?
- What am I learning about myself?

Since I don't have daily interactions with my children or grandchildren, last night I reflected on a lifetime of interactions and rediscovered some of the insights I had over the years about myself when dealing with my children and grandchildren. Here are a few that helped me move toward being who I wanted to be:

- I was capable of being threatening to my kids when they were small even though I didn't see myself as a scary person.
- I had a difficult time letting my kids win at anything.
- I could say things I don't mean—and I know I don't mean them as I say them.
- It was hard to say "I'm sorry."
- I was uncomfortable hugging.
- I learned to cut way back on the teasing that might be hurtful.

I also had some more positive insights about myself:

- I am very willing to set the rest of the world aside and take time with children.
- I love watching kids learn and practice. It's one of the best things to do in life.
- I know I can't truly understand their reality, but trying to understand means a lot to them.

In all fields of life, consistent practice is required to increase skill level: cooking, a tennis serve, knitting, keyboarding, video games. It's no different with parenting skills. Realize that noticing *is* practicing. If you can capture the insights you have as you watch yourself respond to your kids, you can work with those insights until the behaviors become so ingrained, you are able to respond as you want to without even thinking about it.

The range of what we do is limited by what we fail to notice, and because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.

—Daniel Jay Goleman, American psychologist

Keep a journal of your insights

Reflection and noticing are the equivalent of practice, and from practice comes mastery. Recently, it occurred to me that journals serve another purpose. Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird* says it simply: "Writing causes us to notice."

Learning from experience requires observation and reflection. To gain the value we might derive from both unique and everyday experiences requires that we notice. And writing both causes us to notice and helps us not to lose what we have noticed.

Learning from experience isn't automatic. When life gets hectic and you run out of quiet time for reflection, it's even more likely you will miss out on learning from your experiences. A journal is a deliberate commitment to make time for reflection and thinking. It's a way of enhancing what you learn from experience. A journal is also a resource you can later draw upon to rekindle an idea, add to your thinking, rebuild awareness, or find something to share with others. Ten minutes a day of making a few notes is all you need!

Something to think about...

Your kids would like more time with you. How can you make that happen?

What positive things do you tell others about your kids that you havenn't shared with them?

Things I remember from my own childhood …

If you treat an individual as he is, he will remain as he is. If you treat an individual as he could be, he will become the person he could be.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, German writer

Something to think about…

What do you remember hearing from your parents?

How would you describe yourself when you are around your kids?

Things I learned while raising my children …

Whenever I held my newborn baby in my arms, I used to think that what I said and did to him could have an influence not only on him, but on all whom he met, not only for a day or a month or a year, but for all eternity—a very challenging and exciting thought for a mother.

—Rose Kennedy, mother of President John F. Kennedy

Something to think about…

What were your favorite times?

What have your children learned from you about the world so far?

Things I am more aware of now…

Most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted.

— Aldous Huxley, English writer

Remember, we all stumble, every one of us. That's why it's a comfort to go hand in hand.

—Emily Kimbrough, author and journalist

Something to think about…

What positive things do you tell others about your kids that you haven't shared with them?

Twenty years from now, what do you want your kids to remember hearing from you?

Things I notice today about kids, parents, and conversation …

Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with.

—from *The Three Questions* by Jon J. Muth

Something to think about…

Whom do you love to watch interact with your kids?

What do you want your kids to know about winning?

Things that came up when I read parts of the book to my children or grandchildren …

Listening requires entering actively and imaginatively into the other person's situation and trying to understand a frame of reference different from your own.

—S. I. Hayakawa,
U.S. Senator

Something to think about…

What mistakes have you made that would be useful to share with your kids?

What agreements would you like to have with your kids?

Things I've learned from others in my study group …

Good judgment comes from experience, and often experience comes from bad judgment.

—Rita Mae Brown, American author

The real art of conversation is not only to say the right thing at the right place but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.

—Lady Dorothy Nevill, English writer

Something to think about…

Who could use a good listening to?

Where do you need a bit more patience, less talking, and less interrupting?

Things I'm aware of and want to work on …

Always walk through life as if you have something new to learn and you will.

—Vernon Howard, American philosopher

Something to think about…

Where do you need to stand back and let your child learn on her or his own?

When children are small, what distractions might be getting in the way of learning?

The art of reflection

Effective people find time for reflection. It's not easy because of the demands of life and the constant pull of distractions. Still, if you want to learn each day from your experiences, the practice of reflection is critical. Reflecting is different than noticing in the moment. Reflection occurs after an experience or at the end of the day. Effective people try to find time for at least forty-five minutes of reflection per day. Sounds impossible, doesn't it?

Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful.
—Margaret J. Wheatley

Try this. When you are in your car alone, don't turn the radio on. Two things might happen. If you have a problem in life, your mind will go to work on the problem. If you have no current problems, your mind will do something creative. This also applies to those times when you go for a run or walk, or hop onto the treadmill. I understand it's easier to get started if you have some great music playing on your iPod. But once you are into the walk, turn off the iPod and give your mind a chance to reflect.

Brain scientists say insights last from five minutes to five hours. Given the pace of our lives, I think it's probably five minutes for most of us. Build in some time for reflection, and you'll not only have more insights, you'll be able to hold on to them.

Our minds also need something to work with—we need to front-end load our minds with ideas and experiences. With respect to your kids, you have plenty of experiences each and every day. All you need to do is find some time to learn from those daily experiences. Revisiting a few pages in this book each week will help also. The following pages are designed to begin this practice of reflection.

Take some time to reflect on each chapter in this book. Use the questions below to go a little deeper in your understanding of yourself and your conversations in the family. You can do this alone, reflecting and thinking your way through each chapter. Or you might think through the questions with someone else. There is usually another level of clarity and more ideas are available in a conversation between two people. Either way, push yourself to keep asking, "What else?" It's a bit like peeling an onion—with layer upon layer of insights and ideas available to you.

What did you find yourself thinking about as you read the chapter?

What part resonated with your own experience growing up or raising children?

What personal examples come to mind?

What insights have you had:

- *about yourself?*
- *about each of your children?*
- *about your interactions with your kids?*

What do you see that you might try?

I like you.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.

"Pooh!" he whispered.

"Yes, Piglet?"

"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's paw. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

—A. A. Milne, English author

Things to try or look for:

- Begin a list of things I like about my kids.
- What did I notice my kids doing well this week?
-
-
-
-
-

You are a fast learner.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

I really believe in giving young talent a chance. It has been a personal cause of mine to take talented but inexperienced people and throw them into the deep end, and almost every time they deliver.

—Brad Bird, creator of *The Incredibles*

Things to try or look for:

- Where might I be a bit more patient while my kids learn?
- How am I a distraction for my kids when they're learning?
- Let your kids order pizza or make their own appointments.
-
-
-
-

Thank you.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

We have to choose to slow down, to actually see the time and space we are in… to truly see people and accept them in their priceless moments.

—Jodi Hills, artist and author

Things to try or look for:

- Who have I been taking for granted?
- When do I need to stop multitasking?
- When my kids do one of their regular chores, thank them.
-
-
-
-

How about we agree to. . .

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness, and drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.

—Miguel Angel Ruiz, Mexican author

Things to try or look for:

- Where would an agreement make a difference in the family?
- Have a family conversation about agreements.
-
-
-
-
-

Tell me more.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

The most precious gift we can offer anyone is our attention.

—Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist monk

Things to try or look for:

- When did I encourage someone to say more today?
- Who would like for me to share more?
-
-
-
-
-

Let's read.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

The art of reading is in great part that of acquiring a better understanding of life from one's encounter with it in a book.

—André Maurois,
French author

Things to try or look for:

- Where might we add a few minutes of reading into the day?
- What different kinds of things might we read aloud?
-
-
-
-
-

We all make mistakes.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

Making mistakes simply means you are learning faster.

—Weston H. Agor, American author

Things to try or look for:

- What is my typical reaction to problems at home?
- What is my version of counting to ten?
- Who can I give a break to today? Who needs a fresh start?
-
-
-
-

I'm sorry.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

An apology is the superglue of life. It can repair just about anything.

—Lynn Johnston, creator of the comic strip *For Better or For Worse*

When correcting a child, the goal is to apply light, not heat.

—President Woodrow Wilson

Things to try or look for:

- What might I need to apologize for this past week?
- Who might it make a difference to if I said, "I'm sorry"?
-
-
-
-
-

What do you think?

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

There are two lasting bequests we can give our children. One is roots. The other is wings.

—Hodding Carter Jr., Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist

If you want children to keep their feet on the ground, put some responsibility on their shoulders.

—Abigail Van Buren, advice columnist

Things to try or look for:

- When might I authentically ask for input from my kids?
- Where can my kids make real contributions to the family?
-
-
-
-
-

Yes.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

To say yes, you have to sweat and roll up your sleeves and plunge both hands into life up to the elbows. It is easy to say no.

—Jean Anouilh,
French dramatist

Things to try or look for:

- What do I say frequently that usually turns out to mean no?
- Where can I say yes to show my trust in my child?
-
-
-
-
-

Create your own new list.

Twenty years from now, what do you want your children to remember hearing you say?

Children have more need of models than of critics.

—Carolyn Coats, author

Notes and Observations

One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, American jurist

Something to think about...

How many times a day do you say *no*, or *maybe*, or *we'll see*?

What *no* did you say this past week that could have been a *yes*?

Notes and Observations

Do or do not.
There is no try.
—Yoda, in *The Empire Strikes Back*

Notes and Observations

Life rarely runs as smoothly as we'd like. In our minds, we harbor the ideal: seamless days of stress-free work, play, and family—leading to nights of long, uninterrupted sleep. The reality of life is much messier than this ideal, but when we step back, sometimes we see that it is also much richer.

—Mary Beth Danielson, *Mothering* magazine

Something to think about...

Keep in mind, everyone is a little bit scared and a whole lot proud—be gentle out there.

With whom might I be a bit more gentle?

Notes and Observations

Everything changed the day I figured out there was exactly enough time for the important things in my life.

—Brian Andreas, American artist

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