How to Listen so Parents Will Talk & Talk so Parents Will Listen

John Sommers-Flanagan
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To all parents with whom we've worked and
who have worked with us—including our own.

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Preface

This book is about relationships.

In the midst of an electronic age where communication is fast and brief, this is a book about building positive, intentional, and influential face-to-face relationships between professionals and parents. It's also about how parents can build positive and influential relationships with their children. Even this paragraph is longer than a 140-character tweet.

This book is founded on our belief that counselors, psychologists, and other human services providers need specialized preparation and distinct skills to work effectively with parents. We see parents as different from other "clinical populations" and as deserving an approach designed to address their unique needs.

If you work with parents and caregivers (or have one yourself) you know their influence is wide and deep. Sometimes it's clear how powerfully we're affected by our parents and other times it's less clear, but their influence is nearly always at work.

Before jumping into Chapter One, we have a number of explanations, caveats, excuses, and acknowledgments to cover.

Explanations

This book is designed for all professionals who work with parents. This might include school or mental health counselors, school psychologists, marriage and family therapists, counseling and clinical psychologists, clinical social workers, rehabilitation counselors, and other helping professionals.

While writing this book we were faced with many dilemmas, most of which we resolved in one way or another. However, we didn't fully resolve the question of what terms to use when referring to professionals who work with parents. In an effort to not offend anyone in particular, we alternatively use the words *human services professional* (or *provider*), *therapist*, *consultant*, *practitioner*, and *dude*. (Okay, so we never actually use *dude,* but we thought about it.) Our hope is that anyone who works directly with parents will feel comfortable using this book.

In the spirit of Carl Rogers, this book is about *a way of being with parents*. We consider much of what we write in the following pages to be a tribute to his person-centered philosophy and practice. However, to complicate things a bit, this book also follows many of the basic rules of B.F. Skinner's behavioral approach, and, in keeping with Insoo Kim Berg and Stephen de Shazer, includes a focus on solutions. Readers familiar with Alfred Adler will recognize his encouraging influence; there are also the logical consequences of having read Rudolf Dreikurs's explanations for why children misbehave. There is also much of William Glasser's choice theory woven throughout the book. Much like the Motivational Interviewing movement in counseling and psychotherapy, the approach advocated in this book has a person-centered foundation but moves into more active and directive strategies and techniques.

While this book is not a cookbook with specific recipes for working with parents, it does include detailed descriptions of 13 major interventions and less detailed descriptions of 14 others. It also includes 11 tip sheets for parents and 13 specific parent homework assignments. We include cases that focus on many different types of problems. Given this level of specificity, some readers may be disappointed that we don't link specific child problems (e.g., lying, bedtime, etc.) to specific interventions. We intentionally avoided this approach because we want to emphasize and embrace the uniqueness of every parent, every family situation, and every practitioner. The best guidance often springs from the co-creation of solutions generated by practitioner and parent. This is a collaborative and authoritative approach designed to represent not only a way for professionals to be with parents, but also a way that parents can be with their children. We encourage you to bring knowledge and expertise to your work with parents and to apply the ideas in this book with compassion and authenticity.

CAVEATS

Parenting can be controversial. Many people, including professionals, have rigid and emotional opinions about how to parent *right*. Often, taking any position on any parenting issue can start an argument. Not everyone will like this book or agree with its general philosophy or its recommended techniques, tip sheets, and parent homework assignments. However, regardless of your parenting perspective, we feel certain that this book can help make you better at reaching and teaching the many parents who are in need of professional guidance.

The parenting cases and stories in this book are an amalgamation and distillation of many parenting experiences. Some come from our own lives. Others come from the stories told to us in our work with parents. Still others were contributed by colleagues. Each "case" is generally a composite with identifying information removed, shifted, and changed and complex issues simplified and simple issues complexified (we love that particular neologism). These changes were made to protect the identity of parents with whom we've worked. Undoubtedly, anyone who sees themselves in these pages is resonating with a common or universal story that has been experienced by many parents and observed by many professionals.

Excuses

The approach to working with parents emphasized, repeated, and re-repeated in this book will not work with all parents in all situations. Sometimes parents will be perplexingly resistant, and other times our methods or strategies will not measure up to the substantial task of helping parents. In other words, if you plan to work with parents, you should be open to experiencing failure, learning from our mistakes, and learning from your own mistakes. Just as parenting is an art, a science, *and* an immense job where you never quite get it just right, so, too, is the job of helping parents.

Acknowledgments

We have a list of many people to thank. We initially thought we should list every parent we've ever known, but then this would be a book of thanks, free from content. Instead, we're restricting ourselves to a short list of people who have provided inspiration, support, and knowledge.

That being the case, thank you to the Families First Missoula team: Diana Reetz-Stacey, Phillip Mamalakis, Tina Barrett, Andrew Peterson, Kerry Maier, Heidi Kendall, Sara Polanchek, Coco Ballew, Jana Staton, Amy Rubin, Barbara Cowan, Judy Wright, Sarah Mulligan, Danelle Danzer, Anya Vasquez, Amy Westering, and others. Thank you especially to Susan O'Connor whose immense generosity is matched only by her foresight into helping parents and families through gentle and respectful guidance. Thanks also to Linda Braun, co-founder and longtime director of Families First Boston.

Thanks to the University of Montana team of readers, reviewers, consultants, and colleagues, including, but not limited to, Cathy Jenni, Carol Roberts, Carrie Thiel, Crystal Tower, Joyce Mphande-Finn, Ty Bequette, and Deborah Maney. There are many others.

Finally, thanks to the Wiley team, especially Rachel Livsey, Sweta Gupta, Judi Knott, and Kara Borbely. Rachel, we appreciate your enthusiasm for and quick action on this project.

In closing, we'd like to acknowledge the many parenting writers and professionals who have come before us and influenced the way we work with and think about parents. We are particularly indebted to Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish for the concept of "talking so children will listen and listening so children will talk." We love this idea so much that we've borrowed it, reversed it, and shifted its focus to fit our work with parents. It has become abundantly clear to us in recent years that our best ideas are always built on the good ideas of others who preceded us. With this in mind, we hope some readers of this book will join with and surpass us, writing books and offering workshops in an effort to create a better and more compassionate world. That would be most gratifying. However, for now, we simply wish you the best in your efforts to be of professional assistance to parents.

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