How to Communicate with Your Children

A lot of parenting goes on day-to-day as we casually interact and communicate with our kids. This interaction has to do with managing life and proceeds without incident. Some interactions, however, are more significant because they are emotionally charged and potentially fraught with conflict.

I call these **key moments**–situations or events which present a challenge and demand our response. We cannot not respond to a key moment. The question is, are we aware as we respond or do we simply react in a knee-jerk kind of way? Do we communicate, during these key moments, in ways that help our children learn and grow?

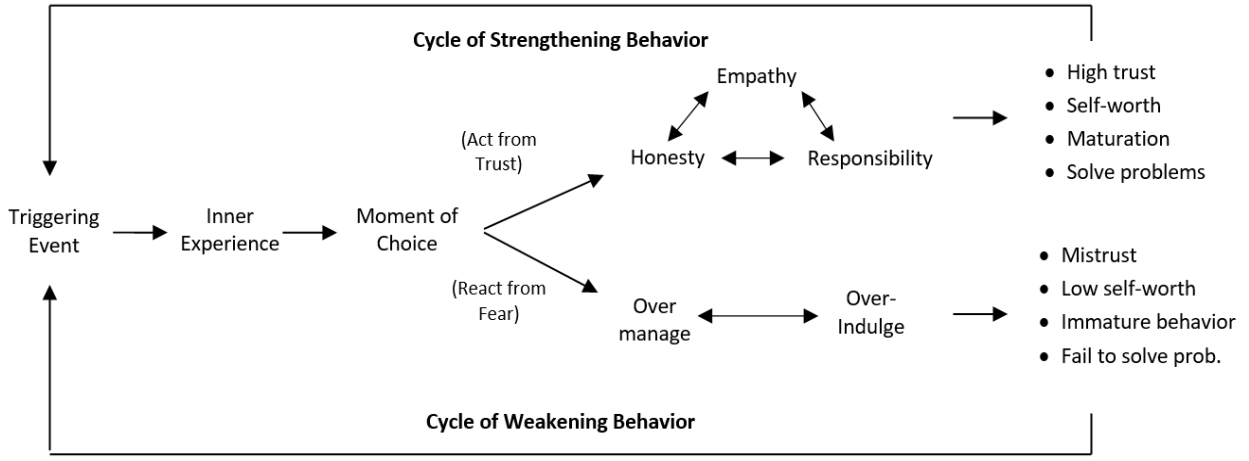
Here are examples of key moments.

- Fifth grader announces: "I hate school and I'm never going back"
- Son refuses to get off the couch and help with chores
- Daughter brings home a really bad report card
- Child dilly-dallies rather than getting ready for school
- Kids bicker and argue every evening at the dinner table
- Son throws a fit when you tell him his screen time is over
- Daughter is pouty and refuses to spend time with family
- Son comes home late and has been drinking

Such key moments are important because our children learn lessons depending upon how we respond. When we handle them poorly, we interfere with our children's ability to learn from their experiences and make good decisions. Handling them well means we're behaving and communicating in ways that promote their growth and development.

We have key moments every day. Some are minor and we handle them easily. Others, however, are (or seem) big and trigger negative emotions (fear, anger, helplessness) that knock us off balance, make us forget what is most important, diminish our enjoyment of our kids, and cause us to react in hurtful ways. Here is what happens.

The Key Moment Model



An event occurs and, consciously or unconsciously, we make a choice about how to respond. If unaware or if strong emotions overrule our reason, we're likely to react from fear or hostility, leading us into a "Cycle of Weakening Behavior" in which we either over-manage or over-indulge our children. As the diagram above illustrates, negative consequences flow from these behaviors—ill will, mistrust and power struggles, low self-esteem, diminishing of personal responsibility, problems go unsolved, etc.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to get cycled into these weakening behaviors, which rob children of their ability to be self-governing and cause them to be externally driven. These reactions impose control on our children from without rather than building responsibility and self-discipline from within.

Although not always easy, we can choose to respond to a key moment from faith, love, and trust. As we do so, we communicate with our children in ways that help them grow and strengthen our relationship. The goal is more than getting compliance or solving the immediate problem. It's to build trust, enhance self-worth, help children think for themselves, solve problems, and take responsibility for their thoughts, feelings, and actions. The consequences are goodwill, trust, high self-worth, and an increase in personal responsibility and ability of a child to manage his or her life.

Notice that there are three skill sets at the top of the Key Moment Model: Honesty, Empathy, and Responsibility. From many years of experience, I've learned that these core skills are the heart of good communication at any time, and particularly in the middle of a key moment. However, before discussing them, I want to continue exploring what happens during the "Cycle of Weakening Behavior."

From the Key Moment Model, you can see that there are two types of weakening behaviors. First is **over-managing**. We do this in many ways:

Lecturing: Moralizing and telling children how to think, feel, and act, which builds resentment and deprives them of the opportunity to think for themselves.

Arguing: Getting caught up in verbal battles, trying to convince each other that we're "right" and they are "wrong," which only leads to more entrenched positions.

Criticizing: Finding fault and making negative comments about their character or behavior to try to get them to do what we want.

Getting Mad: Yelling, hitting, fuming, etc. Expresses parent's powerlessness and causes the child to feel resentment and shame.

Giving Advice: Telling kids how to solve their problems. Too much of this does not help kids learn to solve problems and think for themselves.

Comparing: Pointing out differences between one child and another to either make him feel good or get him to change.

Blaming: Accusing another of negative motives or attributing a negative situation to her.

Threatening: Verbally expressing an intention to impose a severe consequence on a child, often with no intent to carry it out.

Nagging: Constantly scolding, reminding, or complaining to get a child to do what you want.

All of these tactics are ways of taking over and manipulating our children to do what we want. We use them when we feel fearful and anxious and lose our trust in their goodness and capability. The tactics cause our children to lose confidence in themselves and lead to higher levels of anxiety and depression as well as poorer social relationships as they get older. Over-managing keeps our children from taking responsibility for themselves and plants subtle messages, such as:

- "You think I'm bad or stupid or inferior."
- "You don't care about my feelings or will. You just want me to please you."
- "You don't trust me to work this out on my own."

The second form of weakening response to a key moment is **over-indulging,** which also has many forms.

Hovering: Being overly aware and responsive to a child's every move. Failure to allow her the physical or emotional space to make choices or act on her own.

Sympathizing: Communicating pity for what a child is going through. Different from empathy. Rewards him for feeling bad rather than taking action.

Avoiding: Withdrawing into ourselves and leaving our children without support, structure, or guidance because we are uncertain or overwhelmed by their needs.

Catering: Giving in to a child's whims and wishes. Bending over backward to keep him happy or making sure that things go his way so he won't be upset.

Fixing: Solving a problem or doing for a child what she could and should be able to do for herself—making a bed, choosing clothes, talking to a teacher.

Rescuing: Trying to make a child feel better by undoing consequences or not allowing a child to face the consequences of his actions or choices.

Protecting: Preventing a child from facing the realities of life by not letting her engage in experiences that involve social, emotional, or even physical risk.

Flip-flopping: Setting a boundary and then backing down because it was not convenient, the kids pushed back, or you thought you were being harsh.

Pleading: Begging kids to do what you want rather than expecting and holding them accountable.

Bribing: Making a promise to do something or give the child something to get him to do what you want, something he should probably be doing anyway.

Giving in: Wearing down as you hear whining or complaints. Letting a child do/have what she wants to avoid enforcing a boundary. It is easier.

When we over-indulge, we give children too much power or reward their bad behavior rather than letting them face consequences and learn responsibility. We are trying to keep them happy at all costs and so end up giving away our parental authority. Children get messages like:

- "I have to get my way to feel okay."
- "Someone else will make things all better."
- "I need your help if I'm to succeed."
- "Limits don't apply to me."
- "No one is more powerful than me."

Weakening Communication—An Example

Here's an example of a key moment. Let's watch two parents respond to their son in harmful ways.

Steven Carlson was doing well in school until Mrs. Bowman's eighth-grade English class. Steven failed the class and came home despondent, afraid to tell his mother what had happened. Mrs. Carlson probed Steven about what was going on and finally heard his forced, halted confession.

She then said: "That teacher should not have done that to you. She is so unfair. Her expectations are simply not realistic. Besides, you're a good student. Don't you worry, I'm going to talk to the principal and see what I can do."

How common is this reaction? Is Mother's sympathy helping or hurting? What is Steven learning?

Steven's father came home a few hours later. When his wife told him about Steven's grade, Mr. Carlson rushed into Steven's room, making the following declarations:

"How can you bring home an F in English? Your brothers never got Fs in any subject. You lack discipline. You can't make good decisions. Your priorities are messed up and I've had enough of it, young man. I'll tell you what, no more Xbox or TV until further notice. And, by the way, you're grounded from your friends until I know that your grade has improved."

Now what is happening? What are the consequences? Is it more likely to be helpful or harmful to Steven? Their relationship?

There is no doubt that Steven's parents have good intent. They love their son and want him to succeed. In fact, it's usually because we care deeply that we step into parenting traps that are weakening. We're doing our best to get our kids to do what we believe they should be doing and yet don't see how we're robbing them of self-responsibility in the process.

Why We Do What We Do

Although aware that the consequences of over-managing and over-indulging our children are harmful, we slip into these patterns for a number of reasons.

First, we're unaware of what's happening. We've not had a framework or language to understand what's going on in our interactions. We don't see the relationship between our behavior and its consequences.

Second, we get hooked emotionally when our kids are behaving in selfish, immature, or threatening ways. The feelings happen so quickly that we're hardly aware of them (or the thoughts that drive them) before we're acting out of fear or anger. It seems almost impossible to override the emotion with a more rational response.

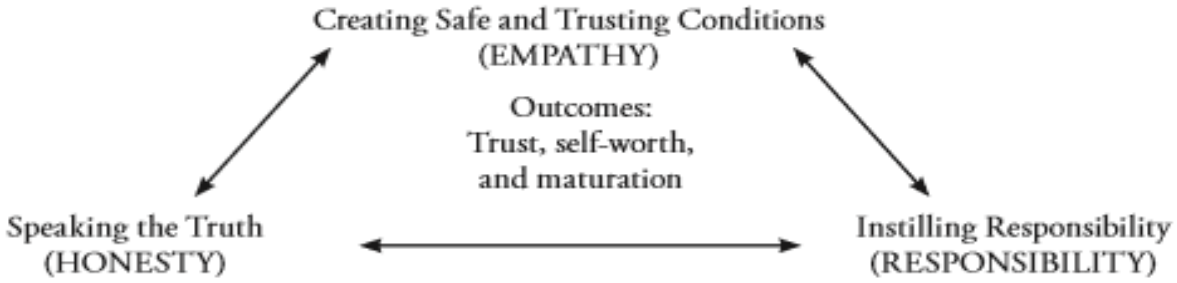
Third, we get payoffs out of these behaviors. By payoffs, I'm talking about short-term rewards that reinforce our weakening communication. A mother who yells gets compliance. A father who gives in doesn't have to deal with whining (at least for the moment).

A final reason we use these strategies is that we don't know a better way. We're likely to be doing something similar to the way we were raised. It seems natural. We haven't learned that there may be a set of skills which we can learn that will lead to better outcomes.

Making a New Choice

Remember the popular definition of insanity? (Continuing to do what we've been doing and expecting a different result.) If we want different results, then we have to behave in a different way. The Key Moment Model suggests that there is a **moment of choice** when we make a decision about how to respond. If unconscious we don't have a choice. We simply react. But as we become more aware, we begin to realize that our responses don't have to be automatic. We can choose to respond in ways that help our children learn and grow in responsibility and emotional maturity.

I'm going to suggest three important themes in making better choices: empathy, honesty, and responsibility. The three themes are an alternative to the weakening patterns of over-managing and over-indulging our children during key moments. Here's an overview:



1. **Creating Safe and Trusting Conditions** (**empathy**) is creating an atmosphere of love, empathy, and respect. It begins with being curious and listening to their point of view. This lets children know that we value and accept them even though they have weaknesses and make mistakes. Such an atmosphere is deeply nourishing and allows our children to feel good about themselves and explore their thoughts and feelings as they learn to make good decisions.
2. **Speaking the Truth** (**honesty**) is disclosing our own feelings or point of view, or giving feedback and getting concerns on the table so we can talk about sensitive topics in a way that helps our children and relationships grow. The intent is to help our children face up to reality, make good decisions, and learn to cooperate with others.
3. **Instilling Responsibility** (**responsibility**) involves skills that teach our children to become self-governing and claim ownership of their lives. They are an alternative to telling, rescuing, or doing for our children what they need to learn to do for themselves. They help children step into the driver's seat of their lives.

Although there are a number of specific skills associated with each of these three themes, for now, I'd like to illustrate the themes by going back to the example of Steven Carlson and his parents.

Communication that Empowers Children

Let's suppose that the Carlson's talk and realize that their approaches were not helpful and they need a better approach. They decide to speak to Steven again. Here's how it might go.

They go down and knock on Steven's door.

Steven, brusquely: "What do you want?"

Mom: "It's your mom and dad. Could we come in?"

Steven, after a pause: "It's a free country," he states coldly.

Steven is lying on his bed, face down in a pillow as his parents come into his room and sit on the edge of his bed.

Dad: "I came on pretty strong a little earlier, didn't I?"

Steven shrugs. "I guess."

Dad: "That must not have felt good."

Steven is quiet, avoiding eye contact.

Dad: "You didn't need me yelling at you. That probably made you feel small and resentful."

Steven: "You never listen to my side of things. You always think you know what's best for me."

Dad: "You know, Steven, I can see that. I didn't listen to your side of things, so your mom and I don't know exactly what you think. Maybe we can start our conversation over. Would that be okay?"

Steven warily responds: "I guess."

Mom: "So how do you see it?

Steven: "Well, it's not like a little F is the end of the world?"

Dad: "True enough. Does it concern you?"

Steven: "Yeah. I don't like getting an F. But, Mrs. Bowman is so unfair. She's treating this class like we're high school or college students. She gives us all this stuff to read and then has us write essays on it in class. It's really dumb. We're only eighth graders."

Dad: "So you think she expects way too much."

Steven: "She does. Nobody likes her. Everybody thinks it's stupid."

Dad: "It's not what you expected from your English class, especially in eighth grade."

Steven: "No, I hate it."

Dad: "That is a pretty strong word. Can you help us understand more why you hate it so much?"

Steven. “I don’t know… (pause). It worries me a little.”

Mom: “How’s that?”

Steven: “Well, I wonder if this is what school is going to be like in the future.”

Dad: “It’s getting harder than in the past.”

Steven: “Yeah it is. And I don’t like writing. It’s hard for me. I know you guys want me to go to college and I guess I do too but maybe I’m not as smart as Ken or Billy. They always got good grades. Maybe I’m not cut out for that.”

Mom: “So you’re questioning your ability and how far you can go.”

Steven: “Or how far I want to go. I don’t like this stuff as much as my brothers. I don’t think I’m as smart as them.”

Dad: “I don’t know whether you are or not Steven. It’s okay either way. But how does it feel to you to think you might not be as smart at them?”

Steven: “Pretty bad. I know you guys are proud of them. You’re always bragging about all they’ve accomplished. I don’t want you to be disappointed in me.”

Dad: “Wow, Steven. I imagine that would be hard if you thought that. That would hurt a lot.”

Steven, tearfully. “It does. I feel like I’ve let you down.”

Parents are quiet, each tearing up.

Dad: “You’re a good son and I really love you.”

Steven cries. “What if I don’t bring home good grades?”

Mom and dad weep. “We still love you. Besides,” says mom, “Something your dad and I talked about is that your grades are your responsibility not ours. You’re going to have to decide how you feel about your grades and how hard your willing to work. Know what I mean?”

Steven: “Yeah, I do.”

Dad: “There are a lot of questions about what you’re going to do, eventually, Steven. You don’t have to answer those today. And we’re here to help you think it through. We want you to talk to us about things like this. But we’re also aware that you have to decide. We don’t know what is best for you.”

Steven: “You really mean that? That feels so good to me.”

Mom: “We do mean it. But for now, you’ve got to decide what to do about English.”

Steven: “Oh brother, not that again.”

Mom: “Yup. What do you think?”

Steven: "English is such a pain. But, it probably wouldn't be very good if I failed it."

Mom: "Do you know what would happen?"

Steven: "I'm not sure."

Mom: "Think hard."

Steven: "I guess I'd have to take it over again."

Mom: "Is that what you want?"

Steven: "No."

Mom: "When might you have to take it again?"

Steven: "This summer?"

Mom: "Yup. What do you think about that?"

Steven: "I'd hate it! Why do I have to do this dumb English?"

Steven complains for a few minutes, with his parents listening and reflecting his feelings.

Mom: "So what do you think? Are you willing to flunk English?"

Steven: "Not really."

Dad: "Can we help you come up with a plan to improve your grade?"

All three brainstorm several options—doing assignments, asking for help, talking to his teacher, etc., until Steven comes up with a final plan.

Dad: "How do you feel about your plan?"

Steven: "Good. I'm really glad we had this talk."

Dad: "What do you think Steven? Are things going to get easier or harder as you advance in grade levels?"

Steven: "Probably harder."

Dad: "Reality is that things will sometimes be hard. You're likely to have classes you don't like or teachers you don't like. Or life doesn't always go the way you want. Agree or disagree?"

Steven: "Agree."

Dad: "The question is how you'll handle these challenges. Know what I mean?"

Steven: "I do."

Dad: "You can always do what you did today—come up with a plan. We're here to support you, son."

Steven: "Thanks."

As you can see from the "do-over," Steven's parents used all three themes. Dad was honest by admitting that he'd come on a little strong. Not only did his honesty keep him internally congruent but also showed vulnerability and his willingness to take responsibility for his behavior.

Most importantly, both Mom and Dad created safe and trusting conditions by listening and expressing empathy toward Steven. Their listening helped Steven feel validated. It also made it safe for him to open up and talk about his deeper concerns.

Finally, his parents asked Steven questions, rather than telling him what to do or solving his problem for him. This helped Steven think more deeply about what was happening and begin to take responsibility for his school work.

Be aware that this example doesn't cover the range of skills used in good parenting. But they do help you see that there are better alternatives to the usual tendencies of over-controlling and over-indulging that come so naturally.

Nurturing parents allow themselves the flexibility to employ different skills, depending on the child, the context, and the outcomes they desire. In fact, these parents are able to step back from a momentary interaction and look at the big picture—promoting the growth and development of their children more than simply solving the immediate problem.

I've taken these concepts from my book and online video program entitled Raising Responsible, Emotionally Mature Children. I invite you to read the book, which has made a huge impact on thousands of parents. Or, purchase my online video program, which will be on a Black Friday sale, by clicking here. By the way, the video program also comes with a downloadable audio MP3 file so you can listen to the program on the run.

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