

Top 10 Tips for Talking With Your Kids

Insights from *What Do You Say?: How to Talk with Kids to Build Motivation, Stress Tolerance, and a Happy Home*

~~You're grounded!~~

What Do You Say?

~~I know what's best~~

Connect with your kids through empathy and validation.

A close relationship with parents is a silver bullet for the harmful effects stress puts on kids. A chief thing that makes our kids feel close is being understood. To let kids know that you can handle their feelings and accept them fully, use reflective listening (**"It sounds like you're really mad at your coach for not letting you start."**) and validate their feelings (**"I think that most kids would feel that way."**). When they're upset, don't talk them out of feelings (**"I don't know why you're so mad about that."**) or jump in with suggestions (**"You need to ..."**).

The language of a parent consultant.

As parent consultants, our role is to help kids learn to run their own lives before leaving home. In this role, we offer our help and advice but don't try to force it: we encourage kids to make their own decisions. Use language to get "buy-in" to see if kids are open to hearing us (**"Can I make a suggestion?"**; **"For whatever it's worth ..."**; **"I wonder what would happen if you ...?"**).

Also, use the language of no-force (**"I'm not going to try to force you to ..."**; **"I obviously couldn't make you do it if you really fought me on this."**), which lowers kids' defenses making them open to reasonable conversations. A parent-consultant also lets kids solve their own problems (with support as necessary) as much as possible: it's by solving their own problems that kids develop high stress tolerance and confidence in their ability to handle stressful situations

Communicate a non-anxious presence in your family.

Systems (including families) work best when the people in charge are not highly anxious or emotionally reactive. Kids benefit greatly when their parents can serve as a non-anxious presence within their family. Most of our kid-related anxiety is about the future, as we fear that they will "get stuck" in a negative place and never get better. Almost all kids go through rocky times and turn out fine. Remembering this can help can nudge us in the non-anxious presence direction: rocky times are simply "part of their path" that can create growth, resilience, and confidence for kids' futures. While stress is contagious, so is calm. Help home be a low-stress zone by using positive language when possible (**"I'm so happy to see you."**) and by letting kids know you love them no matter what (**"I love you no matter what you say or do or achieve – or how hard you work."**).

Remember what really motivates kids.

Using fear, guilt, anger, or bribes to motivate children may "get them to do it" in the short-term. Over time, though, external pressure erodes intrinsic motivation and can harm our relationships. If our goal is not simply for children to work hard but to want to work hard, we should support the three psychological needs crucial for developing intrinsic motivation: autonomy; relatedness; and competency. Keep the "competency" piece balanced and encourage children to "play hard." Engaging what they love to do (while respectfully negotiating limits on video games) may be the most important way for kids to become self-motivated adolescents and adults.

Don't try to change your kid.

If we try to change others who are not asking for help, we will always get resistance and conflict. Kids will even resist changes that are in their own best interest. So, when our kids are struggling, much of our work should be on ourselves. Rather than trying to "fix them," ask open-ended questions (**"I'm wondering how you see that working out?"**), use reflective listening to communicate empathy, and listen for "change talk" – or the reasons kids voice to do things differently. The more we argue one side of their ambivalence (**"You need to work harder."**), the more they will argue back the other side (**"School is stupid."**; **"Even if try, I can't be a great student."**). Communicate confidence in your child's ability to tolerate his/her own strong feelings (**"I**

About the Authors

Dr. Stixrud is a clinical neuropsychologist and an assistant professor at George Washington University Medical School in Washington, DC.

Ned Johnson is president & tutor-geek at PrepMatters, an academic tutoring, educational planning, and test-prep company in Washington, DC.

Top 10 Tips for Talking With Your Kids

Insights from *What Do You Say?: How to Talk with Kids to Build Motivation, Stress Tolerance, and a Happy Home*

~~You're grounded!~~

What Do You Say?

~~I know what's best~~

Communicate healthy expectations.

Excessive pressure to excel is a primary cause of adolescent mental health problems, and parental expectations are often a major source of this pressure. Although parents' expectations are highly related to student academic achievement, expectations are effective (and healthy) when they communicate confidence that a child can achieve – rather than insistence that they must. Much of mental health is changing the thought, “I have to,” to “I want to.” Similarly, healthy expectations communicate that “**you can**” rather than “*you must*.” Modeling a strong work ethic by telling kids “**I believe you can do this if it's important to you**” – rather than “*I expect you to do this*.” This fosters self-confidence and lets kids know that you are behind them all the way, supporting without pushing. Children live up to their potential when they create a life they're happy with – rather than when they meet some arbitrary level of achievement.

Teach your kids an accurate model of happiness.

Although achievement can be important, it is only one part of what contributes to true happiness – and not the most important part. Teach your kids Martin Seligman's formula for happiness, PERMA: Positive emotions; Engagement; Relationships; Meaning; Accomplishment. Remember that one part of the formula doesn't substitute for another. Talk with kids about ways that they can increase their positive emotions (e.g., by getting more sleep; helping other people), and support their passionate pursuit of art, drama, music, coding, etc. Talk to them about how much relationships mean to you and ask them about what they value. Help teenagers understand the difference between an immediate “rush” of pleasure from lasting happiness.

Be a sleep consultant to your child.

As enormously important as sleep is, you cannot make your kids fall sleep. You can, however, teach them about the science and sensibility of sleep. Set a family goal of not feeling tired during the day, and talk to your kids about getting enough sleep. Ask questions such as “**Would you like to get more sleep?**”; “**What keeps you from getting more sleep?**”; “**Is there a way I could help you be better rested?**”; “**Should we try to find a bedtime that works better for you?**”. Model your own commitment to being well-rested and, as a parent-consultant, help your kids find sleep habits that work for them.

Be a tech mentor more than a tech monitor.

Treat kids' interest in technology with respect and curiosity: work “**with them**” rather than “*on them*.” Your ultimate goal is not to always control their use of technology – but to help them learn to regulate their own use, especially before they leave home. Before dismissing the games, programs, or social media platforms they love as stupid or useless, ask your kids to help you understand what they love about their tech life. When kids know you're trying to understand them, it makes it easier to come to agreement about reasonable limits. Also, share your own struggles in managing technology, and let them know that “**we're all in the same boat**” in managing the challenges imposed by these tools, which are designed to be as addictive as possible.

Remember that discipline means teaching kids to learn from their experience.

As parents, we are most effective when we aim to influence our children rather than exert power over them. The deeper our connection to our children, the greater our influence. Punishment is not an effective parenting tool. While consequences can help children learn from their experience, when they are applied arbitrarily, harshly, or punitively, they primarily breed resentment and a desire to “get around” the rules. So, use natural and logical consequences where appropriate and, when possible, agree on rules and consequences ahead of time. Most importantly, when issues come up, engage in family problem-solving in which you express empathy for the child's position, clearly state your own, and seek to find a solution that is suitable to both parties. And to help kids learn the most from the mistakes that all adults-in-training make, remember that your relationship with your child is more important than making them “pay” for any misbehavior.