

**Between Parent and Child by Dr. Haim G. Ginott, Avon Books, ISBN 0-380-00821-1**

I first read this book around 1989 and it greatly influenced my child-rearing practices. In fact, it influenced the way I speak to everyone, especially during conflicts. After reading Games Students Play and Games People Play, I thought it was worthwhile rereading this book to see how its ideas connected with theirs. This review only covers the parts I thought are relevant to the community college classroom.

If you pay attention to how people talk to each other, both spontaneously and scripted (as in television or movie shows), you can see we have a culturally-implanted habit of using insults. Phrases like “you shouldn’t have done that, you idiot” or “that was a stupid thing to do” or “obviously you can’t do this” are common. Between Parent and Child points this out and reveals the internal emotional reactions people have to them. It also offers alternatives which allow us to communicate with others in a more productive, less reactive way.

While its focus is on communications between parents and their children, in the summary I will interpret it for communication between teachers and their students.

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The book presents a conversation between three women and the group leader. The leader describes a scenario: it is a busy morning and, in getting everyone ready for school and work, the toast is burned. Then the leader gives different reactions the husband could have: (1) “My God! When will you ever learn to make toast!”, (2) “Let me show you, honey, how to make toast.”, or (3) “Gee, honey, it is a rough morning for you – the baby, the phone, and now the toast.” (BPC, pgs 28-29) Each woman responds to the husband’s comments and it is clear that the third reaction was the one that was appreciated and did not cause resentment.

The first two comments caused the women to feel anger at their husbands while the third communicated compassion and support during a difficult moment.

The women realized that they tended to use comments like (1) and (2) when communicating with their children. It was then they realized why their children reacted so negatively to them. They also recognized that their own parents talked to them the same way when they were children, and how much they hated it. In fact, some commented how much they hated themselves when they heard themselves talking like that to their children.

What they realized in themselves and in their children is:

When a child is in the midst of strong emotions, he cannot listen to anyone. He cannot accept advice or consolation or constructive criticism. (BPC, pg 26)

A child’s strong feelings do not disappear when he is told, “It is not nice to feel that way,” or when the parent tries to convince him that he “has no reason to feel that way.” (BPC, pg 27)

In order to change this destructive cycle, the book gives strategies for a person's attitude and wording when responding to challenging situations:

The new code of communication with children is based on respect and on skill. It requires (a) that messages preserve the child's as well as the parent's self-respect; (b) that statements of understanding *precede* statements of advice or instruction. (BPC, pg 25)

Strong feelings do not vanish by being banished; they do diminish in intensity and lose their sharp edges when the listener accepts them with sympathy and understanding. This statement holds true not only for children, but also for adults ... (BPC, pgs 27-28)

The book points out that

Children love and resent us at the same time. They feel two ways about parents, teachers, and all persons who have authority over them. Parents find it difficult to accept ambivalence as a fact of life. They do not like it in themselves and cannot tolerate it in their children. They think that there is something inherently wrong in feeling two ways about people...

We can learn to accept the existence of ambivalent feelings in ourselves and in our children. To avoid unnecessary conflicts, children need to know that such feelings are normal and natural. ...

A calm, noncritical statement of their ambivalence is helpful to children because it conveys to them that even their "mixed-up" feelings are not beyond comprehension. ...

(BPC, pgs 37-38)

So what techniques can be employed to improve our communication? The first is a focus on praise.

The single, most important rule is that praise deal only with the child's efforts and accomplishments, *not* with his character and personality.

...

Words of praise should mirror for the child a *realistic* picture of his *accomplishments*...

...

Direct praise of personality, like direct sunlight, is uncomfortable and blinding. It is embarrassing for a person to be told that he is wonderful, angelic, generous, and humble. He feels called upon to deny at least part of the praise. Publicly, he cannot stand up and say, "Thank you, I accept your words that I am wonderful." Privately, too, he must reject such praise.

...

Our comments should be so phrased that the child draws from them positive inferences about his personality.

...

Our words should state clearly that we appreciate the child's effort, work, achievement, help, consideration, or creation.

(BPC, pgs 45-47)

What is important is that the praise describes the accomplishment. Examples I have used in the classroom are: "That was an insightful question," "It was kind of you to give your classmate a paperclip," and "I like the way you explained that to him."

The second focus is on criticism.

When is criticism constructive and when is it destructive? Constructive criticism confines itself to pointing out how to do what has to be done, entirely omitting negative remarks about the personality of the child.

...

When things go wrong is not the right time to teach on offender about his personality. When things go wrong, it is best to deal only with the event, not with the person.

(BPC, pg 51)

Examples I have used are: (1) When a student told me he left his work at home on the day it was due, "I don't accept late work. I hope it doesn't happen again." (2) When a student arrived late after being told she could not be late any more, "You understood last time that you cannot be late again. You need to leave now but you can try to be on time again for the next class."

Next, the book discusses the impact of abusive adjectives.

Abusive adjectives, like poisonous arrows, are to be used only against enemies ... When a person says, "This is an ugly chair," nothing happens to the chair. ... However, when a child is called ugly or stupid or clumsy, something does happen to the child. There are reactions in his body and in his soul. There are resentment and anger and hate. There are fantasies about revenge. ... And there may be undesirable behavior and symptoms. (BPC, pgs 54-55)

At this point in the book, one might get the impression that a parent should, at all times, be the model of patience, calmness, and understanding. Not so. The next focus is on handling our own anger.

In our own childhood, we were not taught how to deal with anger as a fact of life. We were made to feel guilty for experiencing anger and sinful for expressing it. We were led to believe that to be angry is to be bad. Anger was not only a misdemeanor: it was a felony.

With our own children, we try to be patient; in fact, so patient that sooner or later we must explode.

...

Anger, like the common cold, is a recurrent problem. We may not like it, but we cannot ignore it. ... Anger arises in predictable sequences and situations, yet is always seems sudden and unexpected. ...

When we lose our temper, we act as though we have lost our sanity. We say and do things to our children that we would hesitate to inflict on an enemy. We yell, insult, and hit below the belt. ...

Resolutions about not becoming angry are worse than futile. They only add fuel to the fire. ... The peaceful home, ..., does not depend on a sudden benevolent change in human nature. It does depend on deliberate procedures that methodically reduce tensions before they lead to explosions.

There is a place for parental anger in child education. In fact, failure to get angry at certain moments would only convey to the child indifference, not goodness. Those who care cannot altogether shun anger. This does not mean that children can withstand floods of fury and violence; it only means that they can stand and understand anger which says: "There are limits to my tolerance."

... Anger should so come out that it brings some relief to the parent, some insight to the child, and no harmful side effects to either of them. ... We are not interested in creating or perpetuating waves of anger, defiance, retaliation, and revenge. On the contrary, we want to get our point across and let the stormy clouds evaporate.

*Three steps to survival.* – To prepare ourselves in times of peace to deal with times of stress, we should acknowledge the following truths:

1. We accept the fact that children will make us angry.
2. We are entitled to our anger without guilt or shame.
3. Except for one safeguard, we are entitled to express what we feel. We can express our angry feelings *provided* we do not attack the child's personality or character.

These assumptions should be implemented in concrete procedures for dealing with anger. The first step in handling turbulent feelings is to identify them loudly by name. ... If our short statements and long faces have not brought relief, we proceed to the second step. We express our anger with increasing intensity... At other times it may be necessary to proceed to the third step, which is to give the reason for our anger, to state our inner reactions, and *wishful* actions.

(BPC, pgs 55-58)

Examples of the procedures are, "When you continue talking with your neighbor, I feel annoyed." Or, "When you are late again, I get so mad I want to lock the door." These sorts of statements feel

somewhat awkward in the classroom. My preference is to describe the situation: “Talking to your neighbor is disruptive and needs to stop.”

The book spends time discussing self-defeating patterns of behavior. This includes “threats, bribes, promises, sarcasm, sermons on lying and stealing, and rude teaching of politeness.” (BPC, pg 63) Threats are invitations to misbehavior; often the person receiving the threat will misbehave to prove his autonomy. Instead, one should uphold the standards of acceptable behavior and enforce the consequences of the actions without any damage to the person’s ego.

A similar situation happens with bribes. “Our very words convey to him that we doubt his ability to change for the better.” (BPC, pg 65) Some people respond to bribes by “bargaining and blackmail, and to ever increasing demands for prizes and fringe benefits in exchange for ‘good’ behavior. ... Rewards are most helpful and more enjoyable when they are unannounced in advance, when they come as a surprise, when they represent recognition and appreciation.” (BPC, pg 66)

As for promises, they “should neither be made to, nor demanded of, children. ... Relations with our children should be built on trust. When a parent must make promises to emphasize that he means what he says, then he is as much as admitting that his ‘unpromised’ word is not trustworthy.” (BPC, pg 66)

Sarcasm blocks communication “by stirring children to preoccupation with revenge fantasies.” (BPC, pg 68)

Lying is a behavior that can be understood by knowing the reasons behind it. The first is about why children lie in the first place: It could be because they are not allowed to tell the truth. The parental reaction to the truth is so negative that the child lies to avoid it. “If we want to teach honesty, then we must be prepared to listen to bitter truths as well as to pleasant truths.” (BPC, pg 69)

It could be that the child lies

to give themselves in fantasy what they lack in reality. ... Lies tell truths about fears and hopes. ... A mature reaction to a lie should reflect understanding of its meaning, rather than denial of its content or condemnation of its author. (BPC, pg 69)

Finally, there is provoked lying.

Children resent being interrogated by a parent, especially when they suspect that the answers are already known. They hate questions that are traps, questions that force them to choose between an awkward lie or an embarrassing confession. (BPC, pg 70)

It important to know how to deal with lying.

Our policy towards lying is clear: on the one hand, we should not play D.A. or ask for confessions or make a federal case out of a tall story. On the other hand, we should not hesitate to call a spade a spade.

...

In short, we do not provoke the child into defensive lying, nor do we intentionally set up opportunities for lying. When a child does lie, our reaction should be not hysterical and moralistic, but factual and realistic. We want our child to learn that there is no need to lie to us.

...

The rule is that *when we know the answer, we do not ask the question.*

(BPC, pg 71-73)

An example from my experience is when I saw a student using a cellphone in class and I called her name. She dropped the phone into her lap to hide it. I stated, "Cellphone use during class is not allowed." She responded by telling me she wasn't using her phone. I said, "The cellphone in your lap needs to be put out of reach." At this point she looked chagrined and put the phone into her backpack.

The book's next section explores responsibility: "Are there any definite attitudes and practices that are likely to create a desired sense of responsibility in our children?" (BPC, pg 81) To answer, we first recognize that responsibility "requires daily practice in exercising judgment and in making choices about matters appropriate to one's age and comprehension." (BPC, pg 87)

Responsibility is fostered by allowing children a voice, and wherever indicated, a choice, in matters that affect them. A deliberate distinction is made here between a voice and a choice. There are matters affecting the child's welfare that are exclusively within our realm of responsibility. In such matters he may have a voice, but not a choice. We make the choice for him—while helping him to accept the inevitable. (BPC, pg 87)

One example I can offer is when a student is disruptive in class. I will at first give a warning, asking him to stop disrupting. If he persists, I might say, "You have a choice. You can stop being disruptive and stay in the class, or you can take your things and leave." If he decides to stay and stops his disruption, I consider the problem over. But if he stays and continues to disrupt, I say, "You are choosing to leave. Take your things and leave now."

The book concludes this section with this advice:

A good parent, like a good teacher, is one who makes himself increasingly *dispensable* to children. He finds satisfaction in relationships that lead children to make their own choices and to use their own powers. In conversations with children, we can consciously use phrases that indicate our belief in their capacity to make wise decisions for themselves. Thus, when our inner response to a child's request is "yes," we can express it in statements designed to foster the child's independence. (BPC, pgs 102-103)

Examples: "If that is what you want." "It is entirely your choice." "Whatever you decide is fine with me."

In the section on discipline, we have these two words defined:

Permissiveness is an attitude of accepting the childishness of children. ... The essence of permissiveness is the acceptance of children as persons who have a constitutional right to have all kinds of feelings and wishes. ... permitted expression is through appropriate symbolic means. Destructive behavior is not permitted; ...

In short, permissiveness is the acceptance of imaginary and symbolic behavior. Overpermissiveness is the allowing of undesirable acts. Permissiveness brings confidence and an increasing capacity to express feelings and thoughts. Overpermissiveness brings anxiety and increasing demands for privileges that cannot be granted.

The cornerstone of ... discipline is the distinction between wishes and acts. We set limits on acts; we do not restrict wishes. ... At times, identification of the child's feelings may in itself be sufficient to clear the air.

(BPC, pgs 110-111)

Discipline in itself has guidelines.

The limits are set in a manner that preserves the self-respect of the parent as well as the child. The limits are neither arbitrary nor capricious, but educational and character-building.

The restrictions are applied without violence or excessive anger. The child's resentment of the restrictions is anticipated and understood; he is not punished additionally for not liking prohibitions.

(BPC, pg 113)

Next are the techniques for setting limits.

A limit should be so stated that it tells the child clearly (*a*) what constitutes unacceptable conduct; (*b*) what substitute will be accepted.

...

It is preferable that a limit be total rather than partial. ... Such a vague statement leaves the child without a clear criterion for making decisions.

A limit must be stated firmly, so that it carries only one message to the child: "This prohibition is for real. I mean business." When a parent is not sure of what to do, it is best that he do nothing but think and clarify his own attitudes. In setting limits, he who hesitates is lost in endless arguments. Restrictions, invoked haltingly and clumsily, become a challenge to children and evoke a battle of wills, which no one can win. A limit must be stated in a manner that is deliberately calculated to minimize resentment, and to save self-esteem. The very process of limit-setting should convey authority, not insult. It should deal with a specific event, not with a developmental history. The temptation to clean away all problems with one big sweep should be resisted.

...

Limits should be phrased in a language that does not challenge the child's self-respect. Limits are heeded better when stated succinctly and impersonally.

...

Limits are accepted more willingly when they point out the function of an object.

(BPC, pg 116-120)

Examples are "Cellphones are to be put away when class starts." Or "Quizzes are turned in as soon as the time is up." Stated like this, the rule becomes a "classroom rule" instead of my rule, which is much easier for students to follow.

The rest of the book deals with specific child behavior problems that I do not think are applicable to the community college classroom.

### **My Response to *Between Parent and Child***

As mentioned before, this book had a profound impact on the way I speak to people, especially in conflict situations. While I do not always act in the best possible way, overall, I tend to use these techniques automatically. It was natural for me to use them in the classroom and with my students.

Many of the statements made about dealing with children apply readily to dealing with students of all ages and grade levels. Try rereading them while changing the word "child" to "student" to see how it works.

It is not a perfect solution that always works, but it has reduced problems in my classroom. It has also helped me deal with my own emotional reactions to student misbehavior. I can react and then contemplate the students' reasons behind their actions, which calms me down and offers me the chance to respond or not. Sometimes I use the techniques to redirect student-to-student interactions.

In comparing the techniques in this book to those in the "Games" books, I see that the "poor" communication appears to be directly from the Parent ego state and the "good" communication is from the Adult, in that the Adult would give a more rational and reality-based response to the child's behavior. Many of the techniques are from an Adult in an effort to engage the child's Adult ego state. The battles that occur are from Parent to Child or Child to Child. When the Child response happens, the Adult then phrases the rules impersonally, again to engage the respondent's Adult.

This book, and its companion book, Liberated Parents, Liberated Children, give many examples of typical parent-child interactions that go wrong and strategies to steer them in the right direction. They both have a rational approach with concrete procedures and ideas.