

Introduction:

The Child's Voice

Parents Ask, Children Answer

Every parent knows that raising children in today's complex world is a difficult task.

It isn't enough to love them, or to have good intentions; it takes much more: Today's parents want a meaningful, high-quality parenting experience. They want to give their children the best, and to avoid repeating their own parents' mistakes. They want to be wonderful parents to wonderful children who return their love and admiration. They want to be available for their children, tolerant, and wise, all while maintaining their careers and marriages.

But the days (and the sleepless nights) go by, the years pass, and disappointments and tensions emerge. Children are not only a source of joy, but also a cause of frustration and stress. Those same loving parents are sometimes angry, and may even hurt their children. Often parents find themselves confused, unable to understand their children, not knowing how to help them. There are so many questions, and parents may feel frustrated and guilty because they believe they should be able to understand their children easily; why is it so hard?

The first point I would like to make in this book is that parents must make an effort to understand their children, because this understanding does not come about automatically.

It is hard to understand children because while their emotions are rich, it is quite difficult for them to express those emotions verbally. Children feel, do, and send signals; they are less likely to explain themselves in words. In the earliest years, there is an actual language barrier, when they are still missing the words to say what they mean. But later in life too, children tend to speak briefly. It may be difficult for adults to grasp the deeper intentions behind their curt spoken words.

Emotions are often hidden, confused, and unconscious even to the child himself. It is difficult to understand children's emotions because they themselves may not fully understand them. This same problem exists for adults, who feel but are not aware of all of their emotions, and may find it difficult to find the exact words to express what they are experiencing.

It is hard for adults to understand children, because children's logic is different from adults' logic. To understand children, we must tune into their channel and listen to their language and their experience of the world. For example, we need to perceive what a child really means when she says, "I hate my brother! I wish the garbage truck would take him away!" rather than trying to persuade her with adult logic that she loves her brother and that it isn't nice to want to throw him out.

Another difficulty in understanding children has to do with the fact that some of what they say is painful for adults to hear. Children's messages may feel threatening to parents, who misunderstand them in defense. For example, a child says, "Mommy, don't go to work." It is upsetting for the mother to understand her child's suffering, so she offers a logical answer: "I have to work, but we'll have fun together on Saturday," without truly understanding what her child was trying to communicate. For all of the reasons listed above, adults would be naïve to think that loving children is the same as understanding them.

My second point is that we can understand "children's language" if we listen to their logic, rather than trying to apply adult logic.

Children often attempt to explain their feelings to adults, but they do so in a children's language that may be incomprehensible to adults.

That's what this book is about – the questions on parents' minds, and the answers children give in their own words and voices, providing explanations and guidance for parents on how to help them.

This book translates children's words into "adult language." This way, you can hear **children's real voices** as they explain themselves with clarity and reason, "just like adults." The children in this book will say "I..." and will explain directly what is bothering them, what they think about various issues, and how we adults can help them.

This is unique opportunity for parents to get authentic answers from their children.

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As a child psychologist, I often work with parents who turn to me for help with their children. Many times I speak for the child, trying to understand for the parents what the child is telling them with her behavior, her hesitant, confused words, or her silences. I translate for parents to the best of my ability, telling them what their child would say if he could express himself using adult language and logic. I represent the child and his feelings in the all-important dialogue between him and his parents. My experience shows that when parents gain a better understanding of what their child is saying and what he needs from them, their ability to help him improves.

Of course, I cannot claim to know for certain what a child thinks or feels. No-one can be sure what another person is feeling or thinking; this is true for children as well as for adults. At least so far, we have no mental scanners that could allow us to clearly read other peoples' inner worlds. But within the limits of caution and humility, when I attempt to understand a child, I am served by my cumulative knowledge in modern theories of child psychology and by my clinical therapeutic work with children and parents over the last twenty years.

In this book, the children speak through me, so that parents can listen to them, understand them better, and find ways to talk to them sensitively and supportively.

Ninety-seven children speak in this book, trying to answer parents' most pressing questions. From infants and toddlers, who also have plenty to say, to adolescents, these children offer parents a glimpse of their inner world. They speak with maximum honesty, criticism, pain, and anger, but always with love and appreciation. Above all, they express the hope that parents will set aside their adult logic for a moment and listen to the wise logic of children – where all the answers lie.

For example, to introduce the book, one of the children says to his parents:

"I'm glad to have the chance to tell you about myself – what's on my mind, what makes me happy, and what makes me sad; what expectations you can reasonably have of me, and when your demands go too far.

I want you to understand how I feel when I fail, when I experience myself as weak, when I am scared or angry for any reason, when I don't want to do something, when I sometimes hate you, when I love you so much.

I want you to know how I feel when you yell at me, what I think when you work so many hours, and what I go through when you try to explain how I should behave and how I should feel (hint: it makes me feel really bad)...

I want to let you know how to encourage me so that I feel worthwhile, how to prop me up when I'm having trouble, how to talk to me to help me solve my problems, and how to help me when I'm afraid, mad, or losing control. How to take an interest in me without smothering me with too much concern, how to discipline me effectively and without humiliation. How to strengthen my ability to take responsibility, how to understand what I really need, so that you don't neglect me or spoil me too much.

I want to give you some advice, and I hope you can put it to good use.

I certainly hope to succeed, for all of our sakes... I'll see you again later in this book. "

The model proposed in this book focuses on listening to the child's inner voice. It consists of several steps that lead parents through the process of understanding their child.

Stage 1: Sixteen questions parents have on key issues.

For example, how to love without spoiling; how to overcome anxiety; and questions about self-image, emotional control, responsibility, morality, sexuality, school, siblings, friends, and more.

Stage 2: Answers and recommendations for each question are provided by one of the children.

Using my words, the child will explain current psychological theories and the experience of children like him, providing examples and recommendations in response to each question.

Stage 3: Specific questions are asked about different age groups within each general topic.

For example, if the subject is discipline problems, specific questions may deal with what discipline means for a baby crying at night, for a two-year-old with tantrums, for a six-year-old who won't obey, and for a rebellious teenager. A separate answer is given for each age group, with relevant examples and recommendations.

Parents are invited to look at the questions relevant to their own children's ages and situations.

I recommend browsing the wide-ranging list of questions, choosing those relevant to your own child, and reading the general answer, followed by the specific question and answer for your child's age group. This way, among the sample children in the book, you can find your own beloved child's voice.

What can parents gain from listening to their children?

I will answer from the child's point of view again:

"If you listen to me and gain a better understanding of my feelings, we can talk to each other 'eye to eye.' We can try to figure out together what's best for me. In this kind of conversation, you won't label me ('what a stubborn kid') or explain my problems and the solutions you think are best ('if you would only try, you wouldn't have a problem at all'). You won't try to go over my head; you'll listen. You may be older and wiser (really – no sarcasm), but I'm not stupid either and I have some understanding of my own life. I'm the one actually living it, after all. Let me share responsibility for my life. Don't always agree with me, but let me feel that you understand me. Psychologists call this 'empathy,' and it is very satisfying and strengthening. I think that using this type of approach, made up of logic, common sense, and good judgment, you will be able to talk to me and raise me well. What do you think, is it worth a try?"

***"The Child's Voice"* teaches practical techniques for listening and conducting empathetic dialogue with children.**

To listen and understand your child, you won't need sophisticated theories or complicated psychological knowledge. You will mainly need to want to listen, not be afraid to listen; then, you will be able to hear your child telling you everything you need to know.

The essence of the listening technique, for parents and for anyone who wants to hear children's voice:

- Look at the child; really look at him. Listen to the child; really listen to him, to his words, his behavior, his body language, and his silences. Really listen to all of him.
- Think of the question bothering you about him – something you would like to understand better or need to resolve.
- Imagine asking the child the question that's on your mind.
- Listen to what he says in response, with his behavior, body language, words, and silences.

Think about what your child would tell you if he weren't afraid of your reaction, if he were self-aware, and if he could explain himself with adult words and logic.

If you listen carefully, you may sometimes be able to hear the answer yourself. It may not always be clear or arrive right away. Often the situation is complicated and it takes time to understand. But if you persist in listening, you will eventually hear and comprehend. This book is here to help you; in the following chapters, you will find more answers that will enable you to understand your child even better.

The essence of the empathetic dialogue technique:

- The first stage in empathetic dialogue is to listen to the child and understand him. That's what this book is about.
- The second stage in empathetic dialogue is to express your listening and understanding in words and behavior, so that the child can feel your support and caring.

Empathy can be expressed with silence, a hug, or any behavior that matches your understanding (like cheering on a frustrated child or backing off of a stressed-out one).

Empathy can be expressed with a statement, in which you speak in the child's voice as you understand it, in your own words. For example, you could say to an anxious child: "I think you are so angry because you don't want to take that test tomorrow." You may be accurate in your empathy, but you may not. In any case, the attempt to understand, in itself, brings you emotionally closer to your child – which is the goal.

Not all problems and troubles have quick, tangible solutions, but you can always provide the consolation of understanding. That is our responsibility as parents, and our children will thank us for being supportive.

We now move on to the voices of the children who await the adults in the pages of this book, to guide us into their world.

I hope you enjoy reading this book and find it useful.

Heli Barak-Stein

Abstract:

The Child's Voice offers adults a window into children's inner world, a hidden world that can be challenging to understand. The book raises questions that preoccupy parents from infancy to adolescence, such as how to love without spoiling, how to develop independence and responsibility, how to strengthen self-confidence, why siblings fight, and more.

The answers are given in the voice of children themselves, who explain their feelings in the first person and guide adults to help them. The children's answers explain what they would say if they could speak with adult language and logic; they are based on key theories in this field and on the author's extensive clinical experience. A unique and fascinating book!