



ParentSpeak: What's Wrong with How We Talk to Our Children--and What to Say Instead

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A provocative guide to the hidden dangers of “parentspeak”—those seemingly innocent phrases parents use when speaking to their young children.

Imagine if every time you praise your child with “Good job!” you’re actually doing harm? Or that urging a child to say “Can you say thank you?” is exactly the wrong way to go about teaching manners? Jennifer Lehr is a smart, funny, and fearless writer who “takes everything you thought you knew about parenting and turns it on its ear” (Jennifer Jason Leigh).

Backing up her lively writing and arguments with research from psychologists, educators, and organizations like Alfie Kohn, Thomas Gordon, and R.I.E. (Resources for Infant Educators), Ms. Lehr offers a conscious approach to parenting based on respect and love for the child as an individual.

ParentSpeak: What's Wrong with How We Talk to Our Children--and What to Say Instead Details

Date : Published December 27th 2016 by Workman Publishing Company (first published June 14th 2016)

ISBN :

Author : Jennifer Lehr

Format : Kindle Edition 289 pages

Genre : Parenting, Nonfiction

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tinythunder says

This book is worth reading simply to make you think about the implications of common phrases you'd never otherwise think about. It's particularly relevant for parents, obviously, but as most people interact with children on some level it's on my books everyone should read list. The chapter "Behave Yourself" is the best.

It's less important that you agree with everything she puts forward, and more about making an informed decision on how you are choosing to parent your child and updating your language accordingly. It's amazing how universal (in the US) things like forced sharing and apologies are without a second thought as to whether they're even beneficial at all.

Melody says

I gave this book 4 stars because it is causing me to do a lot of rethinking and soul searching, not because I necessarily agree with it all.

In a nutshell, the message of ParentSpeak is that children are people, too, and adults should treat them with dignity, respect, and compassion. In bigger than a nutshell, Lehr examines 14 common phrases or practices and the messages they actually send to children. (These include "good job," "you're ok," "say thank you," time out, spanking, and others.)

While I don't agree with every analysis, reading this has caused to reexamine what I say to my son and what message I'm actually sending him. I would highly recommend this to parents or others who interact with children.

Cari Williamson says

I would give this a 3.5 stars if I could - I really appreciated Lehr's message of humanizing and respecting children. This book was truly thought-provoking and had me examining the power of my language in my role as a parent (and noticing every time/ how many times (!) I robotically used "parent speak" in my day to day).

However, some of her arguments and suggestions felt like a little bit of a stretch or maybe a little unrealistic... namely how I can reason with my one year to understand he needs a jacket to play outside when it's 20 degrees. Perhaps my opinions will change once he's a little older?

Kristy Pavlichko says

Honestly, this book was hard to read for me. The writing was great, but the content just wasn't what I

thought it was. I thought it was more along the lines of how to speak to children but it was more about how everything we do is wrong and we need to coddle our children and talk to them like they're adults who understand emotions. I think instead of putting information out there to help parents, it was just Jennifer's opinions on parenting in regards to discipline, potty training, etc. I was reading in the car and was sharing blurbs with my husband and he wanted to throw the book out the window. While it did open my eyes in certain respects, it gave me the gratification that I am a good mom despite this book basically telling me that I am not. When it comes to books about parenting, I will certainly be reading the reviews before I buy it.

Toyin A says

?This book is so apt in describing the way we talk to kids as if they need to be manipulated, objectified, micromanaged, distressed, invalidated or threatened.

Jennifer explores why we generally talk to children differently and how we can better educate ourselves and take a better approach.

Rating: 4/5

Favourite quote: "So when we parents try to become the drivers of our kids' bodies, when we think we know better, they can come to doubt their own good judgement, and that's truly risky".

Recommendation: If you have found it challenging to decide how you want to speak to or raise your child with relevant words, this is the book for you. Jennifer outlines the effects our words have on children and how we can retrain ourselves to engage with them better.

Natalie says

Wow! Everyone who has a child, wants to have a child, or works with kids needs to read this book. Seriously. When I first started reading, I thought "I'm already going to know everything this book is gonna tell me". I'm a youth services librarian, I talk to kids all the time, they always seem happy! So obviously I know how to talk to kids. Chapters like "don't spank", "don't yell", and "don't say good job all the time" seemed obvious to me. But then I got to the chapters "don't make them say thank you" and "don't make them say sorry". And "don't make them share". I was so surprised! Why not make them do these things? Aren't they important? Then I read the chapters, and it was like "aha". All of these things have one big thing in common: when we make children do things, we are controlling them, and not treating them like the people they are. We aren't letting them learn on their own and make their own decisions.

I've already started using some of the tactics in this book when I talk to kids and it's made me so much more understanding of their emotions and thought process, and I can tell it makes them know I truly care. Instead of telling kids when they go to pick a sticker "okay, you have to make a choice now or we'll choose for you", I'll say "It's hard to make a decision when there's so many choices, isn't it? I understand" and let them take their time - they haven't had a lot of chances to make their own decisions and they need time to think it over. And no longer will I force the girl I babysit to apologize/apologize for her when she won't. This book won't just change how I talk to children - it's affected how I'll talk to everyone.

One thing that can bring about emotions in this book is it makes you think about how your own parents treated you growing up. I was really afraid of fireworks as a kid, and sometimes our family had to sit far away from them or I would cry. My parents would say "you're ruining it for the rest of us!" instead of saying "I understand the fireworks are too loud for you. It's okay, we can enjoy them from back here, too". Little things, but you don't forget them. It's easy to remember the things that upset us as a child. Children today are no exception.

I'm glad I decided to read this book before having children of my own. It's definitely going to affect how I interact with them. Most likely, I'll read it again when I'm ready to have kids to make sure I understand. I really, really encourage everyone to read this! The morals in this book are SO important.

Linda says

Words really do make a difference. A look at what messages we are really sending vs. what we think we are saying. A must read for all new parents!

Aggie says

Thought-provoking and insightful. I never would have guessed some of these or the rationale behind not using these phrases in communicating with our children (some were more obvious and some I didn't quite see the harm in even after the reasoning argument was presented).

As a teacher of primary school students and the mother of three (ages 4, 8 & 11) who is a strong proponent and longtime practitioner of Nonviolent Communication, I am very receptive to the idea that we do need to be careful and how we say it- particularly concerning the most sensitive amongst us: our little ones who look to us to model their own future behaviour and habits.

Llael says

While the positive parenting style she advocates is not new to me, and I did appreciate the focus on key phrases that quickly become habitual - it's an easy entry to begin changing my style. My only complaint is that she doesn't always provide clear alternative scripts to the phrases she says we should avoid. Sometimes, she does, like in the chapter "Share!", which was great. I get that the alternatives are complex and depend on the situation, but all the more reason to offer more alternative scripts.

Also, she introduced me to the idea of 'childism' - now interested to read more about that.

Jessica Piper says

On the day I started reading this book, Mr. Barry, our security guard at work gave me his best piece of child-rearing advice: "Listen to your children. Because if you don't, the streets will". I agreed with his point--if you don't treat your children with acceptance, if you don't value them as individuals, they will seek out people

who will, and they may not always make the best decisions if they have been taught that their opinions are not valid, or that pleasing others is more important than being true to themselves. That, essentially, is the argument of this book. Lehr makes convincing arguments against some of the most seemingly innocuous phrases that parents use--"Good job! You're okay! Give grandma a kiss!" Instead, she encourages parents to start a dialogue with their children. If your child falls down, is he really ok? Does he need a hug from mom more than reassurances that he's tough? Is your child comfortable giving hugs and kisses to people he doesn't know well, or would he prefer a handshake or fist bump? As adults we sometimes forget that children are people too--they are allowed to be sad, frustrated, and have bad days. Understanding what is developmentally appropriate for children, rather than trying to force them to act like miniature adults, is important.

The one phrase that I won't be giving up? "Say thank you!" Lehr believes that children should not be forced to express gratitude that they don't feel. Realistically, most of us say thank you multiple times a day without feeling true gratitude. Whether it's to our family members, coworkers, or strangers, saying thank you to someone who has done something for you is a way of acknowledging their humanity.

Molly says

I'm giving it a four-star review because it was certainly thought-provoking - but that's not to say I agreed with everything I read. I think some of it might also be more effective when applied to older children than mine - sorry, but a 2 year old rarely gives the time to have the sort of conversation about feelings and motivations she's advocating. Our "why don't you want to wear your coat?" conversations go more like this from her end: "no coat!" "Wear coat!" "Yes!" "No!"

Mutiara says

Aside from the way she reacts to her children more as a human being rather than thinking that they're just a "child", she teaches me that everyone, even children worth an explanation. Explanation to why and how things should go that way. For instance, she tries to make everything clear why children need to share, and how to share with your friends, how it is so important to be honest about the things they feel and what it is in their mind, to speak up for themselves. That it is not acceptable for parents to manipulate children by changing the names of their genitals when it comes to sex education. and rather to set them free, than limit their freedom to play or explore new things.

So far, I love this book and this really open my mind up about the important role of a parent to build up a strong foundation of children's personality and mental health.

Katie says

I avoid reading parenting books generally because there are so many different opinions and backgrounds for both families and parent child relationships. I also don't appreciate being made to feel guilty about how I parent when I'm trying to do the best I can. After saying all that I decided to give this book a try. I read the first chapter and a half and then skimmed the rest. Not because it was bad but because I was already aware of a lot of the things she spoke about. She writes well, uses good examples but at the end of the day it's a

parenting book and it will only be good if it speaks to your own personal ideals and values.

Elizabeth A. Ackerman says

Oh, to have had this book back then!

I'm a grandparent of 3 toddlers, and have had questions about many things that were answered in this book. It brought back some memories from my childhood, and the realization that my parents did many things right, and some not so right. The same with the parenting of my children. Oh, to have had this book back then! Now I see my children raising their children, and they seem to instinctively have grasped the principles of the book. It seems that parenting is evolving. But the book adds so much to the understanding of some common, not so good practices, I just want everyone to read it! I hope the parents of my grandchildren will.

Laura Ghory says

A must read for any parent or caregiver. I learned so much about the innocuous phrases I was already saying to my one year old and how unhelpful and even hurtful they can be. Definitely a book that i will revisit over and over.
