fit-ology fast track(sm)

"How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk," by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

overview

Techniques in this book help you cope with kids' negative feelings; set boundaries for yourself and your relationship; tamp down sibling rivalry (at least physical altercations); find ways to *teach discipline* instead of just handing out judgments and punishments; teach lifelong conflict-resolution skills; encourage kids to make smart decisions for themselves (reduce power struggles and support independence); and stay connected in their lives for the long term.

relevant to/keywords

communication, teens, tweens, toddlers, young kids, parenting, relationship-building, gentle parenting, responsive parenting.

good for

parents, teachers, coaches, caregivers of any sort.

notes about this document

Jessica's personal/professional observations are noted in [brackets] throughout — these are about the book but not part of it.

summary: 231 pages summarized in 10

Kids and their feelings

- Parents have an ingrained habit of denying kids' feelings in various ways — these denials create an immediate "wall" of invalidation that shuts down communication
    - Denial ("You can't be hot, it's 60 degrees!" or "Don't cry..there's no reason to be upset.")
    - Philosophical ("Well, life isn't fair.")
    - Advising ("What you need to do is….")
    - Questioning ("What were you thinking? Didn't you know this would happen?")
    - Defending the Other ("No wonder your friend hit you - you made him mad!")
    - Amateur analysis ("Maybe the real reason you're upset is…")
- To counter the jump to denial, use reflective listening:
    - Listen with full attention, the way you'd expect of them
    - Acknowledge without judgment, using words like "oh," "I see," or even "Hmmm…"
    - Help them name their feelings ("Sounds like you might have felt sad — is that right? Oh, a little sad, and also angry?")
    - Give them their wishes in fantasy ("If I had a magic wand, I would give you that ice cream right this minute!")
- BUT….there are some cautions:
    - Some kids prefer not to talk when they're very upset; allow space for silent reflection; practice just being there without talking — know your child

- Kids (older ones especially) can pick up immediately on an overstated reflection of their feelings — ex, if the child seems mildly annoyed but your reflection is “You must be so upset! I bet you wish you’d never see that person again!” then it’s over the top
- Kids don’t like adults to use the same put-downs they give themselves — find the *feeling* instead of repeating the label — ex, if the child says “I’m so dumb!” reflect with “That assignment really had you frustrated” instead of “Oh, so you felt dumb?”

Cooperation

- Parents need to handle their own negative feelings as well (which often arise from the pressure of teaching our kids societal norms and other information); common negativity traps include:
  - Blaming (“You left your shoes out again! Why do you always leave your shoes in the walkway? How many times do I have to say it? You never listen.”)
  - Name calling (“You left your book at school? That was pretty stupid.” “Your table manners are disgusting.” “Clean your room - don’t be such a slob!”)
  - Threats (“If you’re not ready in 5 minutes, I’m leaving without you!” “If you hit your sister again, I’m going to smack you!”)
  - Commands (“Clean your room right this minute!” “You still didn’t take out the trash? Do it NOW!”)
  - Lecturing (you know what this sounds like, and it’s long)

- Warnings (“Don’t climb that, you’ll fall!” “Careful, you’ll get run over!” “Wear a jacket or you’ll catch a cold.”
- Martyrdom (“Stop pestering me - what are you trying to do, make me crazy?” “See this gray hair? I never had any until you came along.”)
- Comparisons (“Why can’t you be more like your sibling?” “All your classmates can do it, why can’t you?”)
- Sarcasm (“You’re wearing THAT today? Well, you should be very popular.”)
- Prophecy (“You couldn’t work out a compromise with your friend? You’re going to grow up really lonely.”)

- Instead of the above, use these techniques; ex, a wet towel left on the bed:
  - Describe. (“Uh-oh! There’s a wet towel on the bed!”)
  - Give information (“The towel is getting my blankets and bed wet.”)
  - Say it with a word (“Towel, please!”)
  - Talk about your feelings (“I don’t like sleeping in a wet bed.”)
  - Write a note (“Please hang me up so I can dry. Love, Your Soggy Towel”)
    - Two principles to remember in trying these new techniques:
      - Authenticity gets through to them; trying to sound sweet and patient when you’re really not will backfire on everyone later.
      - Patience and persistence win — these won’t work the first time; keep trying.

Alternatives to Punishment

- Reasons for punishment - usually something like wanting the child to recognize a mistake and do better. Does punishment really do that? [Calling a punishment "consequences" doesn't help, BTW, because it's transparent.] What about *discipline* instead - teaching a different way? Some ideas for discipline instead of punishment — ex, typical antics in the grocery store:
    - Point out a way to be helpful instead. ("It would be helpful if you'd pick out three nice lemons instead of climbing on the cart.")
    - Express disapproval without attacking character. ("I don't like what's happening - it's distracting to me and other shoppers when you run around.")
    - State expectations. ("I'd like you to walk beside me.")
    - Show the child how to make amends. ("Here, could you put this in the cart for us?")
    - Give a choice. ("You may walk beside me nicely or ride in the cart. Which is your choice?")
    - Take action. ("Oh, you're running ahead and grabbing things. I see you've decided to sit in the cart. Up you go!")
    - Allow the child to experience the aftermath. ("I'm going to the store alone this time while you're here with your sitter.")
    - Problem-solve. [This works best with older kids, and is an elementary version of the CPS system explained in Ross Greene's "The Explosive Child" (coming soon to a fit-ology fast track(sm)!)]

- To problem-solve, listen to the child's feelings. For this to work requires a genuine attitude of wanting to understand, and it takes time, so don't rush it or place your assumptions on it.
- Explain your own feelings. The key here is to be short and clear, so you don't overwhelm the child with emotion and extraneous words.
- Brainstorm a list of possible compromises. Get all the ideas out without judgment — the whole process shuts down if there's an eye roll or a "that won't work."
- Choose one or more to start with. Avoid insulting ideas you don't like, and instead stick to "I" statements (like, "I am not comfortable with that option because….") On the flip side, when your child starts accusing you of "always" or "never" actions, simply and calmly remind everyone that you're not in the past, you're in the present and looking toward the future together.
- Follow through. To wrap up the conversation, outline what steps need to happen next, who's responsible for each, and by what time.

Encouraging Autonomy

- Allow choices. Starting as early as the child learns communication, allow safe choices ("red shirt or blue?" "oatmeal or yogurt?" "chores first or snack first?")
- Show respect for [and normalize] his struggle. ("It's not just you - learning multiplication is hard for everyone.")

- Make space:
    - Don't ask too many questions. Especially when reconnecting after absence, allow conversation to unfold instead of peppering with questions of every detail.
    - Don't rush to answer questions. ("Hmm…why DO we need to brush our teeth?")
- Encourage using sources outside of home. ("Let's think about people we could ask about that.")
- Bolster hope. More reflective listening here — when your child expresses a thought about the future, reflect what you've heard, just observe instead of judging or trying to protect from possible disappointment. ("Oh, you're trying out for the lead in the school play? That will be great experience!")
    - Other ideas:
        - Use 'yes' instead of 'no' whenever possible. (When asked if we can go to the park: "Yes, right after lunch!" instead of "No, you haven't eaten your lunch yet.")
        - Respect readiness; convey your confidence that when she is ready for something, she'll find a way to do it — no rush. (ex, potty training).
        - It's okay to take time to think, rather than responding with an immediate no.
        - Your most important job when your child (especially an older child) has a problem is to help him sort out his own feelings; restate the problem as a question; and steer him toward resources outside the home.

- [Conversely, some kids get very wound up about needing to become independent — it's an unnecessary, unhelpful stressor. Example: my son, around 10, stayed in a mood for at least a week once he latched on to the idea that one day he'd have to pay his own rent and buy groceries. My daughter, around 4, threw daily temper tantrums when trying to tie shoes, until I just explained that I could tie them as long as she needed. Sometimes it's just as important to remind kids that you'll care for them as long as they need you, rather than pushing so hard toward autonomy.]

Praise

- Praise effort, not outcome, and be specific. [No "good job!" or "you're so smart!" praise here.]
  - Describe what you see. ("Wow! I see a clean floor, toys put in their places, books stacked neatly on the shelf, and a bed made nicely!")
  - Describe what you feel. ("It's a pleasure to walk into this room!" "When you take good care of your things, it really shows me that you appreciate having them, and that makes me happy.")
  - Sum up the success with a word. ("You sorted your blocks by size and color, and put them all in the right boxes! That's what I call *organization*!")
  - Don't make backhanded compliments. ("You finally played that song all the way through the way it should be played!")

Freeing Children from Playing Roles

- In other words, beware of pigeonholing kids as “the ___ one” (smart, stubborn, hyper, lazy, happy, sad, introverted, extroverted, compliant, mischievous or any other label). How to free them from assumptive roles:
    - Find and encourage new characterizations. (Fight a “scatterbrain” label like this: “With everything else going on, you remembered to check lost and found for your gloves! That’s really responsible!”)
    - Encourage kids into situations where they can see themselves differently. (Fight a “clumsy” label like this: “Would you please use the screwdriver to tighten these screws?”)
    - Let them overhear your compliments of them to another adult.
    - Be the change; model the behavior you want to see.
    - Reflect to them their special moments; in the face of adversity, remind them of a specific past success.
    - When your child acts according to an old label, state your feelings/expectations; express confidence in ability to shift. (When a “destructive” kid breaks a toy: “It bothers me to see this new toy in pieces. I’d like you to put toys on the shelf when you’re done, so they don’t get broken. I know you like to have nice toys too, and I believe you can take good care of them.”)

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Wrapping up…

[The advice in this book is useful and helpful; in my own world, I've called upon it most during toddler and tween years. It's not perfect, and it takes deliberate customization — especially where ADHD comes into play. And because ADHD often has "ride-along" conditions like anxiety, not all of these tips will work all the time. It was written in 1980, so bits feel a little dated. That said, it's a really good starting place. It meshes well with a strength-based perspective; it's responsive and it's respectful — all of which makes it worth a try!]