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TOOL #1
TALKING

Chapter 1

Control Your Volume Knob

Daniel was a ten-year-old boy who sat down on the overstuffed blue couch in my office one evening, with sad, tearful eyes.

“I don’t like it when my dad yells at me,” he said.

“What does he yell about?” I asked.

“If I did something wrong,” he explained, “like if I leave the basement a mess.”

“So, do you leave the basement a mess?”

“Yeah, sometimes I do.”

“Okay, sometimes you leave the basement a mess and you know that your mom and dad are probably going to say something about it, right?” I ventured.

“Yeah, I know.” Daniel continued, “But I just don’t like the way he yells at me and gets so angry. It makes me not want to be around him.”

Inwardly, I cringed. Those were just the words I didn’t want to hear. Yet another parent/child relationship was starting to become damaged

because of a parent's angry communication style.

Later, when I had a chance to meet his father, Randy, I discovered something I had suspected all along. Randy loved Daniel very much. He did not want to hurt their relationship; in fact, he very much wanted to build it.

In Randy's mind, he was doing his job as a dad. Daniel had been asked to clean up the basement many times and was not responding in a respectful way to this simple parental request.

No argument there.

The problem was the way Randy was doing his job as a dad. Daniel had a lesson to learn, no question about it. In fact, Randy, Becky (Daniel's mom), and Daniel all agreed that he should clean up any messes he made in the basement. And while the tidiness level of the basement was not a matter of national security, it was an issue that needed discussing.

However, without intending to, Randy's style of communication had become more like a sledgehammer that destroys rather than a gardening tool that nurtures. He wasn't setting out to damage his relationship with his son and somehow didn't even seem aware that this is what was happening. But that is exactly what his communication style was doing.

I have heard some fathers try to justify a strong-armed or intimidating discipline style by implying that their role as a father and leader gives them permission to use their emotions in this way with their children. Unfortunately for these fathers and their families, not only are they misunderstanding the basic fundamentals of leadership and effective communication, they are forgetting that Paul tells us to treat each other with patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.¹ And yes, that includes your family.

Luckily for Daniel, Randy made no such mistake. When Randy

realized the impact his communication style was having on his son, he started to cry, right in front of me.

That's right, he cried. Tears trickled down his cheeks as I told him how his son was becoming afraid to talk to him when he was angry. This was never the father Randy wanted to be, and yet this is the father he was becoming.

At Randy's request, we wasted no time getting to work on how he could repair things with his son. The first step was for him to apologize for his angry communication style. Yes, Daniel had not responded properly to the requests to clean up the basement; we were not overlooking that. But that was not the most important thing. The most important thing was that Randy had been damaging his relationship with the son he loved so much. He told Daniel he loved him and was sorry he had hurt their relationship with his yelling and that he would make every effort to speak to him in a respectful way, no matter what the topic was.

The second step was for Randy to follow up on that promise and turn down his volume knob. Which he did.

You should have seen Daniel's smile two weeks later. It was one for the record books.

The basement was clean too.

TALKING TIP #1:

Your communication style with your kids is REALLY, REALLY important. Not their communication style. Yours.

Consider:

How would you describe your communication style? What impact do you think your communication style has on your kids' communication style?

Chapter 2

If Unsure, Press Pause

My son Jake and I were recently watching a YouTube debate between two Oxford professors. The topic, a blend of science and philosophy (a favorite topic of ours), was whether recent advances in science have made belief in God no longer necessary. The debaters were John Lennox and Richard Dawkins, both professors and authors who are extremely intelligent and well respected in their fields. While holding markedly different viewpoints, both Lennox and Dawkins conducted their debate in a spirited, thought-provoking, and professional manner.

As we watched the debate unfold, something caught my eye. From time to time, Lennox would briefly pause in mid-sentence or between sentences and take a quick glance at his notes, obviously thinking of how he wanted to construct his thought, and then continue on with a well-crafted response or question for Dawkins.

He paused.

While Lennox's pauses were subtle, I recognized them because I have seen other experienced speakers use this technique as well. Whether listening to Hearts at Home founder Jill Savage deliver a keynote address

to three thousand moms at a conference or to a pastor delivering a thought-provoking message to a modest Sunday-morning congregation, a brief pause communicates a positive message from the speaker to the listener:

I am in control of what I am saying.

I am not letting a momentary rush of adrenaline take over.

I am going to choose my words carefully, because what I am saying is important.

On the other hand, I have had many moms and dads tell me that in moments of frustration they have blurted out hurtful words and made angry comments to their kids that they wish they could take back.

Stupid

Lazy

You do *nothing around here*.

Loser

Worthless

You are always getting in trouble.

But they can't. Instead, those hurtful words or comments will echo around in their kids' memory. Words that were not meant. Words that do not reflect how Mom or Dad really feel. Words that were simply heated by an angry moment and escaped in a blast of frustration.

Words that could have been prevented.

With a pause.

I have realized there are a few things we, as parents, can learn from seasoned communicators like John Lennox. After all, we are commu-

nicators too. In fact, we are having some of the most important discussions of our lives, every day—with our kids.

Sometimes, the emotional rush of a frustrated moment puts us at risk for saying things we don't mean and will only regret. The Bible tells us, "The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."² It is at these moments of frustration we need to do exactly what an expert communicator would do.

Pause.

A pause may take only a second or two, but it gives your brain enough time to do a quick reboot while you ask yourself a few key questions or give yourself a few timely reminders:

What do I really want to say?

What is the best way to say it?

If I want my kids to talk respectfully when they are mad, then I must do the same.

I want my child to copy my communication style, not me copy theirs.

These refocusing thoughts can make the difference between a discussion that ends well and one that ends worse than before you started.

We've all had a few of those.

If you would like to avoid this type of hurtful, unproductive discussion in the future, you need to remember one thing: to pause.

TALKING TIP #2:

If you are not sure what to say, a brief pause can make all the difference between wise words and hurtful ones.

Consider:

What are a few situations when pausing will help you be a more effective communicator with your kids? Why do you think pausing makes a difference?

Chapter 3

Start with You

It is a chilly September Saturday afternoon and fourteen-year-old Colton and his dad are watching a college football game on TV. Mom is catching up on some work, content to see her son and husband spending some quality time together.

Perfect.

Ten-year-old Luci and her mom take their weekly trip to Luci's dance lesson. Luci listens to her iPod in the car and is excited to see her friends at the dance studio. Mom chats with her own dance mom friends during the lesson and leafs through an article from her new magazine. On the way home, Luci fills her mom in on a bit of relationship drama she learned from her dance friends and then settles back in with her iPod for the rest of the trip.

Perfect again.

Or maybe not.

Watching a favorite television show together. Taking your child to a music lesson or sports practice. Having dinner at your favorite pizza restaurant. Putting a puzzle together on a snowy winter day. These positive

situations happen hundreds of times in most families in the course of daily life. But as described above, they are not necessarily transforming. While spending time together is great, it is only one part of the recipe. Just like chocolate chip cookies would be cruelly incomplete without the chocolate chips, we desperately need the second key ingredient.

That ingredient is you. Not your physical body—we already have that. Your kids need you. Your presence, your interest, your engagement. Your kids need to unmistakably know that you are more interested in them than in your magazine, the football game, or whatever the activity may be.

That's transforming.

And it starts with you.

How do you do this? It is not as difficult as you may think.

Engage first. This simply means that when doing an activity with your kids, you start talking before they do. When you engage first, you are showing your kids you are interested in *them*. You may like football, but you are really interested in them. You may enjoy playing a board game together, but it is their life you are really interested in. The key is in the fact that you engage *first*. This shows intention; you are not just responding to their comments—you are the one kicking off the conversation in the first place.

Ask questions about their opinions, thoughts, feelings, and current activities. *When I engage, what am I supposed to say?* Engaging questions can include just about anything as long as it is about your kids. If you were really into vintage hot rods and were at a classic car show with some unbelievable cars to look at, you wouldn't have much trouble thinking of questions to ask the car owners about how they restored their classic hot rods.

In the same way, when you think about your kids and the current details of their lives, it won't be difficult to come up with lots of things to ask them about. Here's a starter list:

- Things that have happened, or might happen, that day
- Friendships
- School
- Current activities/sports
- Favorite things to do
- Things they would like to do someday
- Anything that is challenging for them right now

Pick a topic and begin. As often as possible, make your questions of the open-ended variety (e.g., "What was something fun that you did today?") so you avoid ending up with a bunch of single-word responses. Your question may immediately lead to a meaningful discussion or you may hop around to a few different topics. Every conversation is different. Sometimes there is something going on and sometimes there isn't. But every time, your kids will know that you showed interest in them.

Warm body language (smile, eye contact, physical touch). If you really want your time to be connecting, make sure it comes fully loaded with plenty of warm nonverbal body language. It is well known that people actually pay more attention to your nonverbal communication than to the actual words you say. So put a little science savvy to work and season your conversation with warm body language, such as little touches, squeezes, and smiles.

The next time Colton and his dad watched a football game, Colton's dad used commercials and halftime to ask his son about sports/activities he might like to try someday. On Luci's next trip to dance class,

her mom took advantage of the car time to ask Luci about her closest friends and how she handles the drama that can happen with fifth-grade girls. Luci didn't even turn her iPod on.

Same activities, lots more connection.

It starts with you.

TALKING TIP #3:

**When you initiate conversations with your kids,
it shows them that at that moment, you are more
interested in them than in anything else.**

Consider:

How does it make your kids feel when you initiate a conversation with them? How do you feel when someone shows interest in your life?