

The School of Hard Knocks:

Lessons from Motivational Interviewing for Everyday Families transcript

Lesson One: MI Spirit

Welcome

Welcome to the School of Hard Talks Online: Lessons from Motivational Interviewing for Everyday Families!

In these seven interactive lessons, you will learn skills and ideas you can use to have better conversations with your child. These skills and concepts come from a practice called motivational interviewing. Healthcare professionals use motivational interviewing to help their patients make healthy changes.

In this first lesson, you will learn about the spirit of motivational interviewing, qualities that can strengthen your relationships with your child and help them make healthy choices.

We recommend keeping a pen and paper handy to write your thoughts and notes as you move through the course.

Introduction

We don't need to tell you that parenting a teen or young adult can be hard. Maybe there is a lot of yelling and arguing in your house. Maybe you're worried about the choices your teen is making. Maybe you wish your child would take more responsibility for things like making meals, getting to school on time or taking prescribed medications. You might be feeling overwhelmed, frustrated and exhausted.

You are not alone.

Despite all the stress you're here because you love your child more than anything. By starting this course, you've already taken an important step towards improving your relationship with your child.

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We hope the skills you learn in this training will reduce the arguing and fighting in your house and help you feel more relaxed and confident in your day-to-day interactions with your child.

The Spirit of Motivational Interviewing

Let's be real, the relationships we have with our children are not necessarily the ones we want to have. We can't wave a magic wand to fix or change relationships. And even though we wish we could, we can't really control other people's behavior either, even our own kids.

At the heart of these skills is the idea that people, including our kids, need to feel understood, confident, and in control in order to receive advice and make good decisions.

Personal Models

Think of someone from your life, past or present who helped you grow or change? Maybe your spouse, a good friend, your parent, a coach, a teacher, or a work colleague. Take a minute to get a good picture in your head of this person and a time they helped you with something you were struggling with.

Now, write down the following:

Who was it?

What were their characteristics and qualities?

What did they do that was helpful to you?

What did they not do?

Once you've answered these questions for yourself, advance to the next slide.

Why People Don't Change

Maybe you wrote things like listening, not criticizing or blaming, taking time to understand, asking questions, being patient, not making it about them or staying calm.

We all want to be accepted and known for who we are even as we consider making changes. We also want to feel capable and confident in our abilities and take charge of our lives. Few people like having decisions made for them. We might appreciate advice from our friends and loved ones but ultimately, we want to make our own decisions.

Meet Carol-Anne and Daphne

Meet Carol-Anne and her granddaughter Daphne.

[An animated graphic shows Carol-Anne, an older woman with dark skin and grey hair worn in tied-back dreadlocks, and Daphne, a young woman wearing glasses with her hair down and has medium-toned skin. They wave.]

After viewing short scenes featuring these characters and others you'll be presented an opportunity to check your understanding. Choose the best answers based on what you've learned so far.

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne

[Daphne looks anxious and is typing on her phone. Phone clicking sounds. Daphne's phone appears on screen, her message reads "This assignment is gonna take me all night!!"]

The phone chimes multiple times. Responses from her friends appear on screen reading "Ugh me 2 but ur so smart," and heart emojis.]

Carol-Anne:

Honey, you're always staring at your phone. You should get out and make some friends.

Check Your Progress

Daphne is nervous about an assignment and is texting with friends.

Her grandmother sees her and says "Honey, you're always staring at your phone. You should get out and make some friends!"

How might Daphne feel right now?

Possible answers:

Judged, misunderstood, defensive, all of the above.

Correct answer:

All of the above.

Feedback:

Carol-Anne's approach likely made Daphne feel judged, misunderstood, and defensive.

Reflection Prompt

Take a few minutes to journal before moving on to the next lesson.

Imagine a movie of your life. In a scene set 10 years in the future. In this scene, you are interacting with your child or children.

What will you be doing together? How will you feel?

What kind of relationship will you have?

How is that different from your current situation?

Lesson Two: The Righting Reflex

Check Your Progress

Which feelings help people get ready to make a healthy change?

Possible answers:

Joyful, confident, and understood.

In control, defensive, and ashamed.

Confident, in control, and understood.

Desperate, ashamed, and defensive.

Correct answer:

Confident, in control, and understood.

Feedback:

In order to be open to healthy changes, people need to feel confident, in control, and understood.

Introduction

In the last lesson, you learned about what people need to feel in order to make healthy changes.

In this lesson, you'll learn about the righting reflex and how that can get in the way of feeling understood and confident.

Let's start with a video. Keep a pen and paper nearby so you can take some notes on how each person sees the conflict.

Video: It's Not About the Nail by Jason Headley

Video used in course with permission of creator, please review the original if desired.

["It's Not About the Nail" on Vimeo.](#)

About That Video

This video shows that even when the solution seems obvious, people need to feel understood before they can consider a change. Pushing someone to accept our solution and make a decision too quickly can get in the way of change. It can make people feel that they have to defend their perspective and their independence. This is especially true for teens and young adults.

The Righting Reflex

Let's give this guy's attempt to help a name: The Righting Reflex.

The Righting Reflex is the impulse to soothe another person's suffering by fixing their problem or pointing out solutions. The Righting Reflex also shows up when we minimize someone's problem and tell them not to worry or insist that their view isn't right.

We do these things because we hate to see the people we care about struggle, feel upset, or do things that could negatively impact their physical or mental health. It's like a reflex because we do it without even thinking. Our intention is to be helpful, but it can sometimes have a negative impact on the person we are trying to help.

Scene: Jordan & James

Narrator:

To illustrate this point, let's review an interaction between Jordan and his dad, James.

[Jordan and James appear on screen, standing in their dining room. Jordan is a young man with swooping hair, wearing a varsity jacket. James is older, with a short haircut, trimmed moustache, and wearing a work shirt with name badge. Both are Caucasian. Both seem tense.]

Jordan:

My geography teacher hates me, she just gave us a huge assignment and I'll never get it done in time. Doesn't she know that I've got other schoolwork plus basketball? She wants me to fail.

James:

Well, do you want me to send her an email to see if she can give you extra time or maybe you can meet with her after school and explain what's going on?

Jordan:

[Jordan thinks to himself]

My dad really doesn't get this. He thinks I can't figure this out on my own. I can't have my dad email my teacher she'll think I'm a baby. Plus, she already knows I have basketball practice and she doesn't care. Dad's ideas will just make things worse. I shouldn't have brought it up.

[Aloud, frustrated]

Just leave me alone.

James:

[James thinks to himself]

Why is he so upset? I was trying to help. If he doesn't fix this he's gonna fail geography. I'm sick of him complaining about this and doing nothing to take responsibility.

[Aloud, frustrated]

Fine, but don't blame me when you fail that class. I tried to help.

What Happened?

What happened here when James tried to fix the problem? Although he was trying to help, James's righting reflex signaled that he didn't trust Jordan to handle the problem on his own. By rushing to fix the problem himself, James missed a chance to connect with his son about how overwhelmed he felt about the situation. He also missed an opportunity to help him figure out his own solution. Instead, Jordan felt misunderstood and didn't walk away feeling confident in his ability to handle the problem he was facing. James felt frustrated and worried about his son's grades and future. They both felt irritated with each other.

There are several ways that James could have responded to help Jordan feel more understood. There isn't a perfect response. Sometimes the best response is nothing at all, a nod, or a "Hm", can go a long way.

Check Your Progress

If given a do-over, what could James say instead of jumping in to fix Jordan's problem?

Possible answers:

"How do you want to handle it?"

"It sounds like you are feeling really overwhelmed."

"Hmm, tell me more."

Any of the above.

Correct answer:

Any of the above.

Feedback:

Any of these approaches could lead to Jordan feeling understood, confident, and in control.

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne

[Narrator] Let's check back in with Daphne and Carol-Anne, as well.

Carol-Anne:

Daphne, I'm so worried about you. I want your depression to get better and I don't think that'll happen if you don't make some big changes. Starting tomorrow, I want you to get up and exercise in the morning like your therapist said you should. Go for a walk around the block. I can even go with you. And by the time the weekend comes, I want you to have some plans to see your friends. I'll drive you anywhere you wanna go, or you can invite your girlfriends to come over here. I'll buy pizza, you can have a sleep over.

How does that sound? Can we do this together?

Daphne:

[Daphne looks distracted and uncertain]

Mm-hm, sure, Grandma.

Carol-Anne:

I'm serious, okay? Can you really promise me?

Daphne:

Yeah, okay.

Carol-Anne:

Is there anything else you wanna talk with me about?

Daphne:

No.

Carol-Anne:

[Disappointed]

Oh, okay.

Check Your Progress

Carol-Anne tried to fix Daphne's problems and was disappointed when Daphne didn't seem to respond well.

Which of these statements represents Carol-Anne's Righting Reflex?

Possible answers:

"Starting tomorrow, I want you to get up and exercise in the morning."

"Go for a walk around the block — I can even go with you!"

"I'll buy pizza and you can have a sleepover!"

All of the above.

Correct answer:

All of the above.

Feedback:

Each of these approaches represent Carol-Anne attempting to "fix" the problem for Daphne.

Check Your Progress

Carol-Anne tried to fix Daphne's problems and was disappointed when Daphne didn't seem to respond well.

What could Carol-Anne say to get a more productive conversation going with Daphne?

Possible answers:

"Help me understand what's getting in the way of getting together with your friends."

"When I was your age, I couldn't wait for Saturdays when I could see my friends all day!"

"I'm taking that phone away until I see some improvement."

"I love you so much Daphne. I worry about you all the time"

Correct answer:

“Help me understand what’s getting in the way of getting together with your friends.”

Feedback:

This approach is a good option for starting a conversation without “fixing” things.

Conclusion

Notice the next time you have the urge to fix a problem for your child or someone you love.

Try and resist the impulse to do so. If you can't resist and you really feel compelled to give some advice, try asking for permission first.

You might say, would it be okay if I give you some advice? This can help your child feel more in control and more willing to hear what you have to say. If they say no, respect that and come back to the discussion another time.

In this lesson, you learned why the righting reflex can get in the way of understanding and undermine confidence. In the next lesson, you will learn how to use a simple yet powerful skill called reflection to help kids feel understood and accepted.

Reflection Prompt

Take a few minutes to journal before moving on to the next lesson.

Think about the last time someone told you what you should do.

How did it make you feel?

Did you end up taking their advice?

What would you have preferred they did instead?

Lesson Three: Reflections

Welcome

Welcome back, this is lesson three, Reflections.

In the last lesson you learned about a common roadblock to helping people change, the righting reflex. The righting reflex is that impulse to “fix it” by offering solutions or reassurance instead of listening.

In this lesson, you will learn how to help your child feel more understood by using the skill of reflection.

What is a Reflection?

So, what is a reflection? A reflection is a statement, not a question. It reflects back what you heard the person say. A good reflection will help your teen or young adult feel understood and accepted and think a little deeper about what they meant. It also gives you a chance to make sure you understand what your child is saying.

Reflections Don't Judge

You might be eager to find common ground with your child in a difficult conversation or you might be worried that by reflecting your child's statement, you could be endorsing something you don't agree with at all.

Reflections can help you slow down. Wait to give your own opinion until you've shown your child that you understand theirs. Whether you agree or disagree, try to keep your reflections judgment-free.

Types of Reflection

Reflections are among the most important tools we have to show someone that we are really listening to them. There are three different types of reflections.

First, simple reflections repeat back what you just heard using similar words. The second, complex reflections, take an educated guess at what the person might mean but is not saying aloud. And third, feelings reflections focus on the emotions that the other person might be feeling or trying to convey.

Avoid the Righting Reflex

You'll remember that in the last lesson, James jumped in to try and fix the problem. He hated seeing his son struggle and wanted to make it better.

That didn't go well.

Let's see how using reflections might change things.

Listen for a simple, complex, and feelings reflection in the following scene.

Scene: Jordan & James

[Narrator] To help us illustrate how reflections can deepen communications and avoid power struggles, let's go back to the conversation between Jordan and his dad, James, about Jordan's geography teacher.

Jordan:

My geography teacher hates me. She just gave us a huge assignment and I'll never get it done in time. Doesn't she know that I've got other schoolwork plus basketball? She wants me to fail.

James:

You think your teacher wants you to fail.

[Narrator] This is a simple reflection. Here, James simply repeated back what Jordan said. He also could have tried for a complex reflection. This might've sounded like...

Jordan:

Doesn't she know that I've got other schoolwork plus basketball? She wants me to fail.

James:

You have so much on your plate right now.

[Narrator] This is a complex reflection because he is guessing at what Jordan means here that he is really busy with school and sports. James also could have tried for a feelings reflection. This would sound like...

Jordan:

Doesn't she know that I've got other schoolwork plus basketball? She wants me to fail.

James:

This situation can be kinda overwhelming.

[Narrator] This gets at an underlying feeling Jordan is expressing: Being overwhelmed by his responsibilities.

The Impact of Reflection

By reflecting Jordan's words and feelings here, James showed he was really listening. This helped Jordan feel more understood. When James held back on offering solutions, he noticed that Jordan could do his own problem-solving.

It is important to remember that the point of reflection is not to show that you agree with your child's point of view, simply that you want to understand it.

Check Your Progress 1

“Smoking weed isn’t a big deal to you.”

What type of reflection is this?

Possible answers:

Simple.

Complex.

Feelings.

Correct answer:

Complex.

Feedback:

This is a Complex reflection. It guesses at what the child might mean but is not saying aloud.

Check Your Progress 2

"You know a lot of people who smoke weed."

What type of reflection is this?

Possible answers:

Simple.

Complex.

Feelings.

Correct answer:

Simple.

Feedback:

This is a simple reflection because it restates the sentence "everyone I know smokes weed."

Check Your Progress 3

"You're confused about why I'm upset because smoking weed helps you relax."

What type of reflection is this?

Possible answers:

Simple.

Complex.

Feelings.

Correct answer:

Feelings.

Feedback:

This is a Feelings reflection because it guesses at the underlying emotion or feeling here: confusion.

Check Your Progress 4

For each of the following examples, match the reflection statement with the type of reflection it represents.

Daphne:

Why do I always have to help fold the laundry? I have a million chores. My sister never helps with anything.

“You think it’s unfair.”

Possible answers:

Simple.

Complex.

Feelings.

Correct answer:

Complex.

Feedback:

This is a Complex reflection. It guesses at what the child might mean but is not saying aloud.

Check Your Progress 5

“You feel like I treat you and your sister differently and it upsets you.”

What type of reflection is this?

Possible answers:

Simple.

Complex.

Feelings.

Correct answer:

Feelings.

Feedback:

This is a Feelings reflection because it guesses at the underlying emotion or feeling here: frustration.

Check Your Progress 6

"You feel like you have a million chores."

What type of reflection is this?

Possible answers:

Simple.

Complex.

Feelings.

Correct answer:

Simple.

Feedback:

This is a Simple reflection because it restates what Daphne said.

Conclusion

You might be wondering when to use a simple reflection versus a complex or feelings reflection. There's no one right answer. Try using a mix and see what feels natural and how your child responds.

In this lesson, you learned how reflections help kids feel understood and accepted, hear their words, ponder them and think a little deeper about what they meant.

In the next lesson, you'll learn about asking open-ended questions, which are often used in combination with reflections to build understanding.

Reflection Prompt

Try out the skills you've learned so far before going on to the next lesson:

Try using reflections with people in your life. How do they react?

Lesson Four: Curious Questions

From Reflections to Questions

Welcome back! In this lesson, you will learn to use curious, open-ended questions to build understanding with your child. In the last lesson, you learned about reflections and how they show you are really listening and trying to understand your child's point-of-view. Reflections demonstrate your interest in and respect for your child's feelings, values, and motivations. However, a conversation with only reflections might feel a bit odd. Sometimes you need clarification or you want to learn more about something your child said.

In this lesson, you'll learn about using open-ended questions to advance the conversation and deepen your understanding.

All-Purpose Questions

Here are some great all-purpose questions that can get or keep a conversation going. Remember, for this to work, you have to really be curious. Questions that are meant to prove a point are likely to fall flat.

Help me understand that.

Tell me more.

What do you like or dislike about that?

What is your biggest concern?

What do you wish I knew?

What do you see as the pros and cons?

Those first two aren't technically questions, but phrases like tell me more and help me understand are great ways to show your curiosity and get people talking.

Open-Ended Questions

Notice that all of those questions are open-ended. An open-ended question is not a yes or no question, a question with a few choices, or a question your child can get wrong.

Here are a few examples:

What did you do today? Versus, are you feeling better today?

What do you think of your therapist? Versus, are you going to go to your therapy appointment today?

Help me understand why English class has been so rough this year. Versus, what's your current grade in English?

Let's go back to that conversation between Jordan and James to show how combining reflections with open-ended questions can move a conversation along. Try to recognize these skills as James uses them.

Scene: Jordan & James

Jordan:

My geography teacher hates me. She just gave us a huge assignment and I'll never get it done in time. Doesn't she know that I've got other schoolwork, plus basketball? She wants me to fail.

James:

You think your teacher wants you to fail?

Jordan:

Yeah, she hates me. How am I supposed to get that project done in time and still make it to basketball practice?

James:

I'm hearing that you're feeling overwhelmed right now. But I'm curious how did you manage to balance schoolwork and basketball last season?

Jordan:

Well, I just stayed up extra late and got it done.

James:

How did that work out?

Jordan:

Not great. I was exhausted, so I played terribly.

James:

So, that isn't something you want to try again. How do you want to handle it this time?

Jordan:

Maybe I'll go talk to coach to see if he can help.

James:

Great idea. Let me know how it goes.

Example: Jordan & James

Notice how James used more reflections than questions in this effective conversation. Asking too many questions can make kids feel like they are under pressure. By alternating between reflections and questions, James really helped Jordan think through his dilemma. By asking how Jordan balance schoolwork and basketball in the past, James helped Jordan consider a new approach without telling him what to do or criticizing past behavior.

Powerful Questions

Asking open-ended questions can help you learn about how or why something might've happened, but they can also help tap into one of the most important motivations for human behavior, values. By learning about your child's underlying motivations for doing or not doing something, you open up a whole new way of understanding their point of view and what they care about.

Here are the powerful questions:

What is most important to you?

Can you tell me why you care so much about this?

Help me understand what this means to you.

These are some of the most powerful open-ended questions you can ask. When you find yourself locked in a particularly tricky power struggle, it might be because you've hit on something your child cares deeply about. Asking an open-ended question can reveal why doing something or not doing something is so important to them. By doing so, you might learn something powerful about your child: what they value.

Check Your Progress 1

Select the non-judgmental, open-ended question from these options:

Possible answers:

“What time will you be home?”

“What do you enjoy about video games?”

“Will you be joining us for dinner?”

“Do you think this room looks clean?”

Correct answer:

“What do you enjoy about video games?”

Feedback:

This question is not yes-or-no, there are not clear incorrect answers, and it implies no judgment.

Check Your Progress 2

Select the non-judgmental, open-ended question from these options:

Possible answers:

“What about going to that party is important to you?”

“What don't you like about your therapist?”

“What do you see as the pros and cons of trying out for the play?”

All of the above.

Correct answer:

All of the above.

Feedback:

These are all non-judgmental, open-ended questions.

Check Your Progress 3

Select the non-judgmental, open-ended question from these options:

Possible answers:

"How are you feeling about applying to college?"

"Why can't you get up on time?"

"Have you finished your housework?"

"Are you going to get a job?"

Correct answer:

"How are you feeling about applying to college?"

Feedback:

These are all non-judgmental, open-ended questions.

Conclusion

You might be wondering when to use a simple reflection versus a complex or feelings reflection. There's no one right answer. Try using a mix and see what feels natural and how your child responds.

In this lesson, you learned how reflections help kids feel understood and accepted, hear their words, ponder them and think a little deeper about what they meant.

In the next lesson, you'll learn about asking open-ended questions, which are often used in combination with reflections to build understanding.

Reflection Prompt

Try out the skills you've learned so far before going on to the next lesson:

Try using reflections with people in your life. How do they react?

Lesson Five: Affirmations

From Reflections to Questions

Welcome back to the School of Hard Talks.

In this lesson, we focus on a special type of reflection called affirmation. You already know that in order for kids to consider a healthy choice or change, they need to feel understood, confident, and in control. Over the past four lessons, you learned how to reset your relationship with your teen or young adult. Using reflections and questions instead of your writing reflex, you can help your loved one feel understood, confident, and in control. Now, we're going to add a new skill called affirmation.

Affirmations

We're not talking about sticky notes with positive slogans, though those are nice too. Affirmations are a special kind of reflection in which you note the value or strength underlying your child's statement. When you notice how your child's values and strengths emerge in their words or behavior, you can call attention to those. Affirmations help to build your child's confidence and are a nice opportunity to express your love and admiration without getting an eye roll in response.

Praise Versus Affirmation

Affirmations are a bit different from praise. These categories certainly overlap, but in general, affirmations don't evaluate whether someone met your expectations. Affirmations recognize your child's unique strengths, which may be very different from your own.

Think of what you might say to a friend who cooked you dinner. Probably not, "Good job."

You might say, "You're so generous, thank you so much," or, "You're a great cook."

Praise Versus Affirmation: Examples

Let's look at a few examples of how praise is different from affirmation or appreciation.

"Great job doing your chores," versus "thanks for taking care of that."

"You're such a good grandchild to visit your grandmother," versus "it was really kind of you to take time to visit your grandmother."

"You are so smart," versus "you studied really hard and it paid off."

Affirmations recognize the effort, skill, or value behind an action. Don't overuse this skill. One or two affirmations in a conversation is perfect.

Values and Behaviors

Affirmations can also help you find common ground and values, even when you are disagreeing about behaviors.

Here are some examples:

"I know it's very important to you to be a good friend to Jessica, but you need to let me know if you plan on staying at her house past 6:00 p.m."

"I know you care a lot about climate change, but you should ask me before you use my credit card to make a donation."

"I know you want to be more independent, so let's figure out how you can get yourself to school on time."

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne

[Narrator] Let's go back to Carol-Anne who has been encouraging her granddaughter Daphne to get out of the house more. In this scene, you can witness reflections, questions and a well-placed affirmation in action.

Carol-Anne:

What are your plans for the weekend?

Daphne:

I don't have any. I still don't really have any friends here. I'm just going to stay home and study.

Carol-Anne:

Your teachers are giving you a lot of work lately.

Daphne:

I don't know. Seems like everyone else is totally fine, but I'm like— I don't know, missing something.

Carol-Anne:

What makes you feel that way?

Daphne:

Well, to be honest, I think switching schools after Christmas, just put me way behind. I mean, I appreciate that we could move in with you after mom died, but the school is just totally different from my other one.

Carol-Anne:

Hmm you've been through a lot, Daphne. Sometimes I have trouble figuring out how you're really doing. You can always tell me if you're feeling sad or overwhelmed.

Daphne:

Yeah, well, I try to act normal so that Denise doesn't freak out.

Carol-Anne:

Protecting your little sister is so important to you. You want good things for her.

Daphne:

That's true. Maybe I'll ask Denise if she wants to go to the library with me this weekend. I'll buy her hot chocolate on the way back.

Carol-Anne:

She'll love that.

Affirmations in Action

Carol Ann picked up on one of Daphne's core values, taking care of her younger sister. Focusing on that value gave Daphne the motivation she needed to make some plans for the weekend.

Check Your Progress

Let's return to the situation between Jordan and his dad, James to illustrate another affirmation. In the earlier lesson by using open-ended questions and reflections, James helped Jordan problem solve balancing schoolwork with sports. Jordan decided to talk to his coach about the problem. Coach gave Jordan permission to skip practice this week without penalty to get his geography assignment completed. Although Jordan is a little worried he won't be as prepared for the game this weekend, he feels better about the geography assignment. He's proud that he handled the problem by working up the courage to talk with his coach. He texts his dad to tell him what happened.

Consider how each of these responses might be categorized. Select each option to learn how they might be interpreted by Jordan.

Possible answers and feedback:

"Great job! You picked school over sports!"

This is praise. However, it is also judgmental and could back-fire because Jordan cares about basketball too. He is already feeling worried about how missing practice might impact his skills on the court.

"I could have just talked to your teacher for you."

This could have the effect of undermining his confidence by suggesting his solution wasn't the right way to go. This option would not make Jordan feel confident or in control.

"Are you sure you are okay with that solution?"

This could undermine Jordan's confidence by making him second-guess his decision. This is also not an open-ended question. If you wanted to open up the discussion, a better option would be "how are you feeling about this decision?"

"That was a tough one, but you figured it out."

This is an affirmation. It recognizes his ability to work through a tough problem. This is the best response of the four options.

Conclusion

In this lesson you learned how affirmations can help kids feel more confident by recognizing their skills, effort or values.

In the next lesson you will learn how to guide your child toward positive solutions without getting into a power struggle.

Reflection Prompt

Take a few minutes to journal before moving on to the next lesson:

What does your child value? What are their strengths? Can you think of an example of when your child made a choice motivated by values or strengths?

Lesson Six: Finding Solutions

Solutions Without “Fixing”

Welcome back!

In this lesson, you'll learn how to put the skills you've learned together to help your child move toward solving problems. You've already learned that in order to move toward a healthy choice, people need to feel understood, confident, and in control.

You have a lot of great building blocks to help nurture those feelings: reflections, open-ended questions, and affirmations, but you might still see your child getting stuck on a problem and feel that they need some help getting unstuck or moving toward a solution. How do you accomplish that without giving in to your righting reflex?

First, Listen

The best way to find solutions is to listen, use reflections and questions to make sure you understand your child's dilemma and values. Many parents feel nervous when they hear their child vent or express a negative outlook. Challenge yourself to keep listening. Venting is okay. Stay in the understanding space a bit longer than you think you should, then help your child turn the corner toward a solution.

Solution-Focused Questions

Once you're sure your child is feeling understood, it may be time to start encouraging your child to find solutions to their problem. Solution-focused questions can help your child turn the corner by eliciting their own ideas about how they might approach their dilemma.

Here are two great solution-focused questions.

How do you want to handle that?

What have you already tried?

Your child may or may not be able to come to a good decision on their own. If they come up with a solution that sounds reasonable, that's great. Encourage them to go for it. And it doesn't hurt to note that you're impressed by their problem-solving abilities.

Brainstorming

If you don't love your child's idea, ask them to think through the pros and cons. You can encourage them to keep brainstorming by asking, "What else might work?" Do this gently, kids might be sensitive to your disapproval. The truth is that your child might not come up with a great solution on their own. You may have information, life experience, or suggestions that they need to hear. Here are some tips on how to give advice in a way that's most likely to be successful.

Giving Advice

Try to see advice as something you earn the opportunity to give. Before you offer advice, check to make sure you've put in the work. First, you invested time and understanding the problem by using reflections and asking a few nonjudgmental questions. Then you asked what solutions they've already tried or have in mind. At this point, your child may have generated a good idea and all you need to do is support them in implementing it.

But they may also need some advice. Gauge their interest in hearing your advice by asking explicitly, "can I make a suggestion?" Then offer your advice or suggestion. Once you've done that, hand the control back over by asking, so what do you think you'll do next?

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne, part 1

[Narrator] Daphne continues to have a hard time feeling comfortable at her new school. She often calls her grandmother Carol-Anne from the nurse's office when she is suffering from anxiety. Help Carol-Anne use her new skills to get through this hard talk.

Daphne:

I can't be here at school one second longer. I feel like I'm going to explode. I need you to come pick me up.

Check Your Progress 1

Daphne: I can't be here at school one second longer. I feel like I'm going to explode. I need you to pick me up now.

Choose the best response.

Possible answers:

"It's just a normal day, go back to class."

"Do you have a fever?"

"You are feeling really bad."

Correct answer:

"You are feeling really bad."

Feedback:

This is a reflection, and the best response Carol-Anne can use here to show that she is listening and open to the conversation.

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne, part 2

Carol-Anne:

You're feeling really bad.

Daphne:

Yes! I feel terrible. I, I just want to run out of here.

Carol-Anne:

Getting away would help you feel calmer.

Daphne:

If I could just go home, I'd feel so much better, but if I leave then I'll miss rehearsal or the school play at 3:30.

Check Your Progress 2

Daphne: If I could just go home I'd feel so much better. But I know if I leave I'll miss play practice after school.

Choose the best response.

Possible answers:

"Okay, so go to play practice then."

"On one hand, you want to leave school so you'll feel calmer but you also don't want to miss practice."

"You can't leave school and still attend play practice — that's not how it works."

Correct answer:

"On one hand, you want to leave school so you'll feel calmer but you also don't want to miss practice."

Feedback:

This is a reflection of what Daphne has said and aids in processing and continuing the conversation.

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne, part 3

Carol-Anne:

On the one hand you want to leave school so you'll feel calmer, but you also don't want to miss rehearsal.

Daphne:

Yes, exactly.

Check Your Progress 3

Choose a question that could help Daphne to find a solution.

Possible answers:

“Should I call your doctor and try to get you in next week?”

“You know I’m at work right now, right?”

“When this happened before, what helped you feel better?”

Correct answer:

“When this happened before, what helped you feel better?”

Feedback:

This question is open-ended and prompts Daphne to find her own solution based on what’s worked in the past.

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne, part 4

Carol-Anne:

When this happened before, what helped you feel better?

Daphne:

I don't know. I mean, at my old school, I would walk on the track with my friend during lunch.

Carol-Anne:

So, getting outside in the fresh air with a friend seems to help.

Daphne:

Yes, but I don't even have any friends here, Grandma. I already told you that. Will you please just come me?

Carol-Anne:

Okay, okay, that makes sense. Hmm, can we go back to something? I heard you say earlier that being at rehearsal today is important to you. How would you feel if you missed it?

Daphne:

I'd feel terrible. Like I'd let my castmates down.

Carol-Anne:

So what could you do to help you feel calmer so you stay at school and make it to rehearsal?

Daphne:

I don't know. I feel trapped!

Check Your Progress 4

Oh no! Daphne still seems stuck.

Choose the best way for Carol-Anne to give her advice.

Possible answers:

"Can I make a suggestion?"

"Take a deep breath, take a walk outside, and go back to class."

"Hang out in the nurses' office, I can be there in about an hour."

Correct answer:

"Can I make a suggestion?"

Feedback:

By asking permission before offering advice, Daphne is more likely to feel in control and open to Carol-Anne's suggestion.

Scene: Carol-Anne & Daphne, part 5

Carol-Anne:

Can I make a suggestion?

Daphne:

I guess.

Carol-Anne:

If taking a walk outside with someone will help you right now, is there a teacher or a counselor that can help you?

Daphne:

That might work.

Carol-Anne:

So what do you think you'll do?

Daphne:

I'm going to listen to some music here for a minute and then I'll see if Mr. Kendall from guidance can do one loop around the track with me. If that doesn't work, can I call you again?

Carol-Anne:

Yes, Daphne, that's a good plan.

Conclusion

In this lesson, you learned how to guide your child toward a solution without getting into a power struggle or giving into your righting reflex. You can use questions to gently turn the conversation towards solutions and ask permission before giving advice. The more attentively you listen as they vented or described the problem, the more likely they would accept your advice. In the last lesson, you will learn some techniques for re-approaching a conversation that goes badly and quickly diffuse power struggles.

Reflection Prompt

Take a few minutes to journal before moving on to the next lesson:

What is a dilemma that your child is currently facing?

Imagine how your child might be feeling about what's happening.

What questions can you ask about that situation before giving your own advice? Write down your questions so you have them ready.

Lesson Seven: Mistakes and Recovery

The Building Blocks

Welcome back. This is the final lesson in this series, The School of Hard Talks. In the previous lessons, you've gotten the tools you need to get through hard talks with your teen or young adult. You learned how important it is to help your child feel understood, confident and in control. You also learned to identify and tame your righting reflex, offer thoughtful reflections, ask curious questions, use confidence boosting affirmations, and help your child find solutions to the dilemmas they face. You have all the basic tools in your toolkit.

Mistakes and Recovery

But of course, everything can still go badly. You won't always have the energy and patience to remain calm in the face of the nonstop stressors of parenting and everyday life. Everyone snaps at their kid sometimes, it's normal, or maybe you used all your skills so carefully and it still didn't work. Your child was having a bad day. They accused you of being fake or maybe the topic was just too raw, that's normal too. It's tempting to avoid the topic and declare the conversation a failure, but if you're feeling like you both might be ready to try again, here are three strategies for re-engaging your child after a difficult talk or day.

Transparency

The first strategy is to be transparent. Many parents find it's helpful to be totally transparent with their kids when trying out these communication skills. You can say, "I'm working on being a better listener," or, "I'm testing out some new skills because I want us to communicate better and fight less."

If you're worried that your child will think you're acting weird, or if they accuse you of being inauthentic, this can be helpful. You're being honest with them that yes, you are trying something new and you're being a great role model.

Apology

The second strategy is to apologize.

We all have different cultural beliefs about whether it's appropriate to apologize or admit fault with our kids, but most teens and young adults appreciate it when grownups can acknowledge that they sometimes make mistakes. Even if you don't feel like you really did anything wrong, taking partial responsibility for a conflict can make room for a more productive conversation. You could say, "I'm sorry I yelled at you about getting home late. I'd like to try having that conversation again and I promise I'll work hard on controlling my temper."

Hand-Overs

The third strategy is something we like to call a handover. Handovers are simple statements that can instantly diffuse power struggles. Make no mistake, this involves you the parent acknowledging that your teen is ultimately in control of a given decision or behavior, so use these only if you feel okay about that.

Here are some examples of handovers.

"I can tell you've already made up your mind."

"You decide what's going to work for you."

"It's your choice."

An honest handover is kind of magical because its effect is that your teen or young adult is suddenly contemplating the real consequences of their own actions, but a dishonest or a passive aggressive handover will only escalate the conflict. So, this is all about your tone and authenticity.

Hand-Overs in Action

For example:

Jordan:

Get off my back. You had no business emailing my teacher.

James:

Oh great, you'll just handle this yourself. Good luck! I can't wait to see your report card.

[Narrator] Now compare.

Jordan:

Get off my back. You had no business emailing my teacher.

James:

You're right. It's your assignment and you're in charge.

Hand-Over: Example One

[Narrator] Here are a few more examples of situations in which transparency, an apology, or a handover might work well.

James:

I don't want you hanging out with that kid. Every time you go to his house, you come home reeking of marijuana.

Jordan:

Oh, my God, Dad. Get out of my way. You can't stop me.

James:

[takes a deep breath] Okay, Jordan, I'm sorry I yelled. Going to this party seems really important to you.

Jordan:

Well, yeah, he's not my best friend or anything, but I really wanna go. My girlfriend is going too, and she doesn't like it when I get high. I'll just hang out with her.

Check Your Progress 1

James: (deep breath) Okay Jordan, I'm sorry I yelled. Going to this party seems really important to you.

Which strategy did James use?

Possible answers:

Transparency

Apology

Hand-over

Correct answer:

Apology

Feedback:

By apologizing after raising his voice, James recovered and kept the conversation going.

Hand-Over: Example Two

Carol-Anne:

You have an appointment with your therapist after school, so here's some cash for the bus fare.

Daphne:

I think I'm done with therapy.

Carol-Anne:

What? You've only had two appointments.

Daphne:

Yeah, and I feel better. Look, I don't need to be sitting in the office every Tuesday for the rest of my life.

Carol-Anne:

It's not the rest of your life. Your doctor recommended trying it for six months. You know what? The truth is I have to work. I can't follow you around when school gets out. You'll decide whether you go to that appointment.

Check Your Progress 2

Carol-Anne: You know what? The truth is I have to work - I can't follow you around when your school gets out. You'll decide whether you go to that appointment.

Which strategy did Carol-Anne use?

Possible answers:

Transparency

Apology

Hand-over

Correct answer:

Hand-over

Feedback:

Carol-Anne has acknowledged that Daphne is ultimately responsible for her own actions.

Hand-Over: Example Three

Jordan:

You and Mom are way too overbearing. I can't stand it anymore.

James:

You feel like we're overbearing?

Jordan:

Duh, that's what I just said! Why are you being so weird?

James:

To be honest, I took a class on communication skills, and I'm trying to use 'em. It's awkward for me too, but I'll do anything to have a better relationship with you. It's the most important thing to me.

Check Your Progress 3

James: To be honest, I took a class on communication skills and I'm trying to use them. It's awkward for me too.

Which strategy did James use?

Possible answers:

Transparency

Apology

Hand-over

Correct answer:

Transparency

Feedback:

By being open and honest about the awkwardness of the situation, James can avoid making the situation worse while demonstrating that he is committed to improved communication.

Conclusion

In this lesson, you learned three strategies for getting back on track when conflict arises: transparency, apology, and handovers. Everyone gets frustrated with their kids. Parenting is a demanding job! Give yourself a break. Take a walk, take a breath. It's okay, your own mental health matters. By dealing with conflict, you set an excellent example for your kids. You show them that you're strong enough to deal with whatever comes your way, and they are too.

Course Conclusion

Thanks for enrolling in the School of Hard Talks' online version, Lessons From Motivational Interviewing For Everyday Families. We hope that you have learned something useful.

We're rooting for all families to experience more joy and less stress in their lives.

If this course has impacted you or there is something you'd like its creators to know, please fill out the anonymous survey linked on the course home page. On the homepage, you'll also find additional resources relating to motivational interviewing and families.