

Part I

Strategies and Techniques for Talking



What Is Good Communication?

WE NEED TO BEGIN WITH A BASIC PREMISE: *good communication is effective communication*. Communicating well means getting through to another person, having them hear you and appreciate the point or value of what you are saying. Communication can be *instrumental*, as when we ask a basic question “What do you want for dinner?” This sort of communication is heard fairly well by boys, and it’s also their favorite type to use: “Pass the milk. Can I have 20 bucks? You gonna eat all them fries?” Generally, it’s not hard for boys to communicate basic questions or statements. It’s the other type of conversation — *social communication* — which poses a challenge for boys. This is a serious issue because most important communication is inherently social. We communicate because we want to connect with another person. For example, what do most of us do if we want to get to know another person better? What would you do if you wanted to build more trust into a relationship? What would you do if you wanted someone to better understand your thinking or emotions? Of course, you would talk to them! Communicating is what our instincts tell us to do when we want to be closer to someone, when we want a stronger relationship.

Just because adults want a stronger relationship, however, doesn’t mean boys want the same. Mostly they are a little scared of getting too close to adults and would rather remain somewhat undercover. When they do communicate with adults, they typically do so with a specific purpose, and that approach goes right along with the “bottom line” psychology of boys. Often, teenage boys think to themselves, “I’ll

communicate when I want something.” You’ve probably noticed that boys can be more relaxed when they talk with friends, but their behaviors are totally different when talking with adults.

Should we fight this tendency in boys, or get comfortable working with it? Definitely, the latter. Overcoming the distance between any two people begins with mutual acceptance. The longer we spend trying to bend people to our will, insisting that they think and act differently, the longer we will be frustrated. Even the youngest of boys is capable of a fiercely strong will, and it doesn’t take much for a boy to win a communication war. He just stops talking!

I’m an optimist, and I’m going to assume you are flexible and willing to experiment with a different approach. First, let’s agree that there is a degree of planning required to effectively communicate with boys. Let’s also assume that the measure of whether our approach is working is how the boys respond. Sometimes that means giving us a signal that we’ve been heard, like raising their eyes to meet ours. Sometimes it amounts to more, like changing a behavior, or taking the initiative to do something without having to be reminded multiple times. (If you’ve ever met a boy under age 18, you are no doubt familiar with this challenge.) When we do get a response, it tells us we are building a bridge between our minds and theirs. Think of how a bridge can be used by people to advance or retreat. The key point of communicating with boys is to give them a bridge, a way to connect with us when they need to. Sure, at times they may choose to withdraw, but a well-built bridge will invite boys across time and again. To build this bridge, we must know something about the minds of boys, and that is largely the focus of Part I of this book. We will especially need to understand how listening style, apprehension, social awkwardness, and sometimes adolescent self-absorption, can be roadblocks to that bridge. It has become popular to refer to these problems as pathologies (diagnosable conditions), but the problem with that perspective is that it makes all of boyhood a “disease.” I believe this is a serious problem — for us more than them.

Our number one priority is to get through to boys so that our support and guidance can fully register. Yet being an effective communicator has another important benefit: we become role models for boys

so that in time they can replicate our good communication strategies. Good teachers use empathy and strategy to create a connection with their students all the time.

Whenever we are communicating well, we are also teaching.

Form and Content

I've already described two types of communication, instrumental and social, and emphasized that, in this book, we want to work on the social type. Communication also has two dimensions that are critical to remember: *form* and *content*. If we focus exclusively on the content of communication (what it is that we want to say), we lose awareness of the form of our communication. By form, I mean the way we say things (the tone, volume, and speed of our speech). I also mean how we use nonverbal signals like facial expressions and body language. Although most people focus intently on what they want to say, they pay much less attention to the way they speak. When we feel as though our words have been misunderstood, it's often the case that the tone of our speech, facial expressions, and body language told a different story than our words.

Major hint: It is the *form* of communication that resonates deeply for boys, and which they remember for hours and days after a conversation. This is Rule #1, and I'll remind you of it often. Your tone is "louder" than your words. How you say things lingers longer than what you say.

Boys remember the way that you looked at them after reviewing a report card, and they remember the sound of your voice when you congratulated them after a sporting event, and how that way of speaking differed from the way you sounded after the school play. Most boys are sensitive to the tone of your voice, and the emotions conveyed by your face. By the way, it's not only an angry tone or look we need to think about. Boys are especially sensitive to signals that suggest they are not

smart, or need to be treated like a “child.” Even when you want to respond to their apparent immaturity, remember that you are building a relationship fueled by respect. More on this massively important topic later.

Taking them seriously is the single most important and significant privilege you grant a young person.

If I had a choice between giving you the skills to change the form of your communication or telling you exactly what to say, I would choose the former. (Fortunately, I’m going to have a chance to advise on both!) I think it would surprise many, but the truth is that boys listen better to people who take charge of the nonverbal signals in their communication. You have probably heard many times, in self-help books or on television, that nonverbal communication is as important as verbal communication. This is true, and in this book, I want to be very specific about what that means for communicating with boys. When we talk about vocal tone and nonverbal signaling, such as eye contact, I’ll be emphasizing exactly how your voice and face “set the table” for great conversations.

Good communication also relies on emotional intelligence. Essentially, we must detect what other people are thinking or feeling and know how to respond to those thoughts and feelings. Everybody knows people who do this well, and there is usually at least one person in most families who has this type of intuition. An entire science of emotional intelligence (EQ) has emerged in research, and many books have been written on this topic. EQ begins with excellent self-awareness, and an understanding of how you come across to other people.¹ As you work with the ideas in this book, I want you to become a student of your own communication. It’s not enough to know that you effectively get through to people; I want you to become aware of what you’re doing right, and when you’re communicating well. It’s that sort of awareness that takes you to the next level and inspires confidence and creativity. And, by the way, as you learn strategies for getting through to the important boys

in your life, you'll notice that these skills are extremely helpful when it comes to communicating with others as well.

Remember that your voice and speech are extensions of what is in your mind. Each of us knows this intuitively, which is why we pay such close attention to the way other people talk when we want to understand what they are thinking or feeling. This is also why people can sometimes become offended by another person's words: tone gives words an "edge." Most of us take communication very personally. Words are more than abstractions; they come from the deepest places of belief and emotion. That's why we go over another person's phrasing again and again in our mind — especially when there has been a conflict of some sort. As most of us have learned, it's hard to retract your words once they've been spoken. Boys may act indifferent to what we say, but they are absorbing the feeling of words and tone, and they're using those signals to draw conclusions about us.

What type of communication works well for boys?

Communication that is easiest for boys to digest has three important qualities:

- **Vocabulary** that is familiar.
- **Phrasing** that is nonjudgmental.
- **Tone** that is matter-of-fact.

Talking and Momentum

A basic, but critical measure of good communication, is that it moves a relationship forward. That's also a basic condition of healthy relationships: they grow and evolve. This is especially true when one person in the relationship is still growing up, because that person is changing dynamically, almost daily. I'm not saying that every relationship must constantly improve. I think that's unrealistic. But I do think relationships must adjust to life and situational changes. Good communication is key. On a micro level, we can see this in a very straightforward way. For example, do your questions or statements bring out responses that

eventually become a conversation? Does that conversation have enough relational “energy” to sustain itself? (Do you ever feel like saying, “Dude, this isn’t like TV, you have to talk back. I’m feeling very lonely here.”?) And does conversation include topics that are interesting to both of you? Please note the word *both*; good communication with boys should often touch upon topics that are interesting and relevant to both parties. I know from experience, however, that not all adults recognize or believe in this sort of mutuality. Some people think good parenting is lecturing from a point of authority: parents do the talking, and kids do the listening. Dads are famous for this approach, because they’ve been waiting for years for it to be their turn! My dad sometimes communicated with me in this way, and although I know he did so with good intentions, it was still annoying.

If we define good communication with boys as first and foremost that which gets their attention, we will have skipped the fundamental step of building a relationship. If you’re a Type A personality — all business, and not a second to waste — you may try to resist this idea. You just want to cut to the chase, right? Sorry, but there is no practical way to demand the attention of boys just because we are older, have more status, or can speak really loud. (This might work at first, but then you’ll have none of their attention when they turn 16 or 17 and can speak as loudly as you.) As a family therapist, trust me on this. Being authoritative is good; being authoritarian is bad. The difference between being a coach or a boss can determine whether a relationship has a future.

Building a relationship is not a matter of being clever, or putting someone in a hypnotic trance that forces them to listen. It’s more about being authentic and respectful. We use respect and tone to encourage boys to listen and respond. This is the secret of “strength and honor.” When we are communicating well, the other person feels as though they have been included in our *mental orbit*. When I refer to this orbit, I’m talking about the psychological space of primary concern — the place where most of our focus is. Great communication is a joining of two or more orbits, with each person in a conversation feeling invested and heard. For example, if you’re one of millions of parents concerned your son is spending so much time on social media that his homework

is neglected, I strongly advise spending some time connecting around his interest in social media before you lay down the gauntlet and threaten to take his phone.

Think of a boy's interests and focus as his *mental orbit*. Then think about what you need to do to be a part of that orbit. I guarantee that your non-verbal signals, and talking about relevant topics, will accelerate the process. Practice, practice, practice.

To connect with another person's orbit, we must understand their priorities. More specifically, we should register what is important to that person, and what they might like to talk to us about. Right now, chances are your son is not sophisticated enough to be as concerned about your priorities and interests as you are in his. But he does want your love and approval. As the adult in the relationship, you may have to enlarge your "orbit" while he's learning to relate to others with more skill. So often, good communication with boys begins with a topic that is of special interest to them. It's certainly better to capture a person's interest, rather than trying to command his attention by startling him or somehow making him anxious that there will be consequences if he doesn't listen. It would be great if kids could translate our upset feelings as a sign of compassion and loving concern. But they don't. They mostly feel adult upset as criticism and reprimand. Once they hear that angry tone, they can barely pay attention to the words.

Sometimes, boys can assume the look of someone who is listening without turning their full attention to us. When they do, it is usually because they are afraid they are going to get flak. Unfortunately, kids who adopt this attitude are often so anxious that their capacity to listen effectively, and remember what has been said, is diminished.

I recognize that parents and other adults want to communicate with boys in a variety of ways, not all of which are directive. Many parents would like to know their sons at a deeper level, and wish that their sons would open up and talk to them. Two decades of work with families has taught me this is an important need for parents, because without

an opportunity to converse about important things with kids, we feel as though we are being excluded — and it hurts. Countless mothers, especially, long for closeness they had with younger boys, which has all but disappeared by the time boys become tweens.

Conversely, if you have a child who tends to be somewhat obsessive, you may feel as though you're included in too many judgments. Most adults, however, would like to be included or consulted regarding important decisions. I don't necessarily mean matters of greatest privacy. Anyone who has been a child understands that sometimes there are things you don't want to discuss until you are ready. Concerning more routine decisions and thoughts that make up our days, adult guidance can be consistently useful. If you follow the guidance in this book, you'll learn how to provide that guidance without slipping into lecturing or scolding. You will absolutely feel more optimistic about getting through to boys in a way that works for them. You'll have a communication style that makes boys happy to have you in their corner.

Communication and Gender

Is communication harder for boys than girls? It depends on what you mean by "harder." In some situations, boys can talk freely. For example, most boys are more verbal in public than private settings. Think of a time when boys are hanging out with their male peers. In those situations, I think we see lots of bold communication, with boys using their words to vie for attention and status. In my own research, boys have told me that their ability to persuade peers is an important sign of status. It means others are giving you respect. But let's be clear, that sort of public talk usually lacks authenticity. It's closer to grandstanding or a sales pitch than it is to sincere expression. I accept this because I think *that sort of communication is a developmental need for boys*. If we make them feel self-conscious to talk that way in our presence, they'll learn to be more secretive. Boys are not about to restrain bravado because for many there is too much at stake — especially their standing among peers.

Other types of communication are a greater challenge for boys. I'll get into these issues in more depth in the next two chapters, and

we'll see that the short-term memory challenges of boys, the volume of sound they hear, and their tendency to go on thought tangents can make personal or private communication challenging. There is no single consensus about the cause of these challenges for many males, but some of the difficulties appear to be based in the brain. For example, did you know that estrogen is more helpful to working memory than testosterone?² This means boys lack a hormone that has been shown to be particularly helpful in remembering the chunks of information that allow us to recount important experiences, or remember things like how to study for a test. Research has also shown that boys have a higher proportion of white matter to gray matter in the cortex of the brain.³ And it's the gray matter that is responsible for making short-range connections within the brain. The prefrontal cortex — the place where attention comes from — seems to be somewhat more efficient in girls than boys, although differences tend to diminish over time.

These issues are not trivial. They have much to do with the differences we perceive between genders. I believe that these differences also stem from the different ways boys and girls are socialized, but there's no getting around biological differences. As of this writing, biological brain difference is unfortunately still a contested issue, which only distracts us from what we can do to constructively improve communication with boys. Some believe that asserting biological brain difference is a gateway to suggesting a hierarchy, or might result in the unfair allocation of school resources. I am opposed to both of those possibilities. My sole purpose in identifying the apparent processing differences of boys is to strategize about better communication with them.

You Must Practice

We could probably agree that some skills come easier to some people than others. But most skills are acquired through constructive practice. All the skills in this book will become more available if you can commit to practicing them on a consistent basis. I know most of us don't think of communication as something we need to practice. Maybe it isn't, if we are only thinking about how easy it is to talk with friends or other family members. Boys are a different story. You are communicating

across generations. If you are female, you are also communicating across gender. *The simple fact is that the better you can hear your own voice, and how it registers with boys, the more effective you'll be in getting through to boys.* A major mistake is assuming that when we ask logical and rational questions, we have essentially done our job. Sorry, but that is not the case when it comes to relating to boys. Our questions may be logical, but if we don't pose them in a way that invites participation, we haven't moved a conversation and a relationship forward.

The reason communication warrants our careful attention is that it is at the center of how we present ourselves and the impressions we leave with other people. How effectively we communicate sets up the possibility for future communication. One of the best feelings you can have after talking with boys is the sense that both of you are looking forward to the next chance to talk. If you struggle in communicating with your son or students, you've probably felt the sting of the opposite: there's nothing to say, and the conversation stalls. This happens to all adults, at least occasionally. I've spent years cultivating my own communication skills with boys, and it still happens to me from time to time. Sometimes it's hard to find the thread of common interest that brings two people together. You may wonder, "Why is it so hard when we both belong to the same family?" You'll do a whole lot better if you open your ears and listen closely to the things that boys say when there is no self-consciousness. There's almost always a hint in those moments for attentive listeners. Make a mental note to start your next conversation with that theme.

When all else fails, you can rely on a precious human commodity — truthfulness. When we are truthful, we are also authentic, and often a little vulnerable. Boys sense this about us, and recognize when we have dropped our defenses. In response, they feel more comfortable dropping their own. Boys respond well to people that *walk the walk*, as well as those who *talk the talk*. For example, they like it when they see adults taking the kinds of emotional risks that adults are encouraging them to take. This is important for fathers or male mentors to do, because our society often tells boys that showing vulnerability, like being unsure of yourself, is not masculine. Often, traits associated with femininity are both overtly and covertly devalued. This is contrary to the "strength and

honor” perspective, which emphasizes personal integrity, respect, and a willingness to learn what you don’t yet understand. Good communication always involves a kind of transaction. Your openness is exchanged for boys’ attention and participation. The attitude and style I’m recommending here might sound a little like skills the leader of group therapy uses, and they are. If you are leading a conversation, you are the facilitator, and it’s up to you to model emotional skills and honesty.

What is the hidden, and most important ingredient, in good communication with boys?

RESPECT

Respect and Seriousness

OK, let me challenge a widely held assumption about how to get along with boys. It’s the belief that great relationships with boys are built on lots of jokes, bending rules, and horsing around as much as possible. Hey, I know boys like these things, but they are not the qualities that win the day for adults who want a sustainable, respectful relationship with boys. Don’t get me wrong, I believe humor is valuable, but not as valuable as respect and seriousness. Does this surprise you? I think it would surprise many people, and I’m not sure that everybody will — at least initially — agree with me. If you’re thinking, like many parents, that the most important thing that your son needs from you is love, then I’ve got some bad news for you. Most boys already assume they’ve got that in the bag. What I mean is that boys are not sitting at home anxiously wondering if their parents love them. I understand that in a few sad cases, boys may in fact need to be assured that they are loved. But I also know that readers of a book like this one have already met that need.

For most boys, the most important way to demonstrate your love is through respect. When treated with respect, a boy senses that he is being taken seriously. That seriousness confirms his positive status. When you project seriousness, you are making your own mental orbit visible and accessible. This transparency is a natural and strong attractor for boys and young men. You will find respect and seriousness throughout this

book because they are the most important, yet most under-discussed themes in the psychology of boyhood. Hours of school assemblies and parental lectures attempt to convey morals to boys. Though well intended, they usually neglect the most effective form of appeal — respect. When I am fortunate enough to have a chance to demonstrate the power of respect at school gatherings, it is an eye-opener for everybody.

“We Could Be Heroes”: Connecting with Boys’ Ideal Selves

Ultimately, good communication helps to connect boys with their “ideal selves.” This is the sense of self that they fantasize about being — the person that they imagine themselves to be in a perfect world. It is of great importance for boys to connect with this ideal self, to feel like they have a chance to incorporate idealism in their day-to-day lives. This possibility is what the magic of Harry Potter books is about, and it’s also why many boys admire athletic heroism. What we need to remember is that boys are also looking for an appreciation of their ideals in their communication with adults. Adults’ respect and seriousness help to convey openness to boys’ ideals, as do questions that give boys a chance to experiment with those ideals. There is in most boys a yearning to be something more than they are. This may sound childish or entitled, but it is the nature of boyhood and, in my view, the nature of manhood for many. I believe we must hold awareness of striving for ideals in mind as we converse with boys. I’ve noticed that understanding boys’ yearnings is as important when talking about the need to rake leaves or care for the dog, as it is when talking about prospective vocations.

In this chapter, I’ve oriented you to some basic principles of good communication, suggesting that the ultimate goal is building great relationships. I’ve also emphasized some of the unique aspects of boys’ psychology, and how they play a role in boys’ expectations of us. We’re going to look at these issues in greater depth, with lots more detail about practical skills. For now, here’s what is important:

Remember:

- Social communication is the greatest communication challenge for boys.

- Vocabulary, phrasing, and tone set the stage for great conversations.
- Get inside a boy's mental orbit by paying attention to what is important to him.
- Be generous with your respect.

Points to Consider:

- When I communicate, how do I sound to boys?
- Do I notice my nonverbal signals (volume, pace, pitch, gestures, facial expression) when speaking?
- What is my priority in communicating with my son or student?

Is He Hearing You?

TWO BASIC THINGS WE NEED TO CONSIDER are that boys don't always hear enough of what we say, and what they do hear is often at least partially inaccurate. Many attempts at talking to boys can be thwarted by the boys' selective hearing, poor listening skills, and distraction. Let's take a closer look at these challenges to better understand what's going on when we are trying to communicate. Then, we'll strategize about how to get around these obstacles.

The brain differences of boys are a hot topic in the fields of psychology and neuroscience. I've written about these differences in my other books, and have spent the past decade talking to schools and parents about the effects of these differences. The point of this book is to examine how the psychology of boys affects their communication and our ability to get through to them. It's hard to quantify the extent of gender difference in communication and social behaviors; is it an average 20% difference or 5% difference? I'm not sure any scientist would be prepared to come to such broad conclusions. The range of difference varies according to what kinds of cognitive abilities we might examine. Those who minimize the importance of differences point out that *within group differences* (among boys and girls) are greater than the difference between boys and girls. This is true. Like most scientists, I believe that the genders are much more alike than they are different. But this doesn't invalidate the fact that there are differences, and that they do matter.⁴ It's human nature to pay close attention to differences, perhaps for the very reason that we are so much more alike than different. If everyone