



Voice Lessons

for Parents

*What to Say,
How to Say It, and
When to Listen*

Wendy Mogel, PhD

Recommended Reading

This is a selective list of my current favorites, categorized, then alphabetically by author. I've left off big names and popular classics and included lesser-known titles that prop open the door to those conversations that leave parents tongue-tied and those that provide a portal to shared enchantment.

Books for Children

Ellis, Carson. *Du Iz Tak?* Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2016. Beautiful and whimsical creatures speak in a made-up language. This friendly picture book for children ages seven and up covers a broad spectrum of modern family formation, including adoption, same sex, single, and step-parenthood.

Harris, Robie H., and Michael Emberley. *It's So Amazing!: A Book about Eggs, Sperm, Birth, Babies, and Families.* Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2014.

Schaefer, Valorie Lee, and Josée Masse. *The Care & Keeping of You: The Body Book for Younger Girls.* Middleton, WI: American Girl, 2012.

Tarshis, Lauren. *I Survived Hurricane Katrina*, 2005. New York: Scholastic, 2011. The thrilling and historically accurate books of the *I Survived* book series feature children alone—at Pearl Harbor, during the attacks of September 11, during the invasion of the Nazis. Making you nervous? As is always a sensible strategy, check commonsensemedia.org for ratings based on educational value, positive messages, positive role models, violence and scariness, and language.

Waber, Bernard, and Suzy Lee. *Ask Me.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. A father and daughter walk and talk on an autumn day. The sparse

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words and lovely rhythm of their conversation serves as a surprisingly practical guide to the delicate art of parent-child call-and-response.

Books for Teens

Harris, Robie H., and Michael Emberley. *It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2014.

Hoxie, W. J. *How Girls Can Help Their Country: Handbook for Girl Scouts*. Carlisle, MA: Applewood Books, 1913. The book was written by the organization's founder, Juliette Gordon Low. Applewood Books, a Massachusetts-based publisher devoted to "reprints of America's lively classics—books from the past that are still of interest to modern readers," released a hundredth-anniversary edition. Read it and learn how a girl can secure a burglar using just six inches of cord!

Natterson, Cara, and Josée Masse. *The Care & Keeping of You 2: The Body Book for Older Girls*. Middleton, WI: American Girl, 2012.

Silverberg, Cory, and Fiona Smyth. *Sex Is a Funny Word: A Book about Bodies, Feelings, and YOU*. New York: Triangle Square, 2015.

Books for You

Biddulph, Steve. *Raising Boys: Why Boys Are Different—and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-Balanced Men*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2013. An Australian author. A terrific, accessible, sensible book.

Damour, Lisa. *Untangled: Guiding Teenage Girls through the Seven Transitions into Adulthood*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2016. I recommend this gem to all the parents of teens in my practice.

Gnaulati, Enrico. *Back to Normal: Why Ordinary Childhood Behavior Is Mistaken for ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, and Autism Spectrum Disorder*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2013.

Isay, Jane. *Unconditional Love: A Guide to Navigating the Joys and Challenges of Being a Grandparent Today*. New York: HarperCollins, 2018.

Kobliner, Beth. *Make Your Kid a Money Genius (Even If You're Not)*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.

Lancy, David. *The Anthropology of Childhood: Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings*. Second Edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Laureau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

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- Leitman, Margot. *Long Story Short: The Only Storytelling Guide You'll Ever Need*. Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books, 2015.
- Lieber, Ron. *The Opposite of Spoiled: Raising Kids Who Are Grounded, Generous, and Smart About Money*. New York: HarperCollins, 2015.
- Lythcott-Haims, Julie. *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*. New York: Henry Holt, 2015.
- Nash, Jennie. *Raising a Reader: A Mother's Tale of Desperation and Delight*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.
- Olive, John. *Tell Me a Story in the Dark: A Guide to Creating Magical Bedtime Stories for Young Children*. Sanger, CA: Familius, 2015.
- Ripley, Amanda. *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013.
- Roffman, Deborah. *Talk to Me First: Everything You Need to Know to Become Your Kids' "Go-To" Person about Sex*. Boston: Da Capo, 2012.
- Shatkin, Jess. *Born to Be Wild: Why Teens Take Risks, and How We Can Help Keep Them Safe*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2017. Teenaged mice choose to drink more alcohol when in the presence of their peers. Adult mice? Same amount. There you go.

A Book for All

Fisher, Dorothy Canfield. *Understood Betsy*. First published in 1916.

My mom told me I loved this book as a child. I read it again recently and still do. The novel features a protagonist with a host of modern problems. At the start, nine-year-old Elizabeth Ann is a most pathetic creature: scrawny, pale, and self-absorbed, she suffers from math phobia, chronic digestive disorders, generalized anxiety, and nightmares. When she is sent to live with relatives on a farm in rural Vermont, an uncle picks her up at the train station and matter-of-factly hands her the reins of the horses and of a new life.

Understood Betsy is Canfield's best-known book. "A mother is not a person to lean on, but a person to make leaning unnecessary" is her best-known quotation.

Appendix

RELATIVE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN BOYS AND GIRLS IN BRAIN DEVELOPMENT AND FUNCTION, EXPANDED	
Boys	Girls
The inferior parietal lobe of the brain is generally larger in males; this area is involved in spatial and mathematical reasoning. The areas of the brain devoted to language develop more slowly in boys than in girls. Boys primarily use the left side of the brain when speaking and listening.	Girls have more neurons in the Broca's and Wernicke's areas of the brain, where language is produced and interpreted. The corpus callosum, the nerve tissue connecting the two hemispheres of the brain, is thicker in girls' brains, which facilitates communication. Girls use both sides of the brain when speaking and listening.
Boys are better at three-dimensional reasoning (for example, the ability to imagine how an object will look when rotated) and better able to separate emotion from reason.	Girls more automatically integrate emotion and reason.
Boys can more easily hyperfocus but are less adept at shifting from one task to another.	Girls' thicker corpus callosum enables them to multitask better than boys because they are able to process stimuli using both sides of the brain simultaneously.
Areas of the brain involved in spatial memory mature four years earlier in boys than in girls.	Areas involved in language and fine motor skills mature up to six years earlier in girls than in boys.

Appendix

Boys	Girls
<p>Nearly all of boys' speech is comprehensible by age four and a half. On average, they utter fewer words per day than girls and speak more slowly.</p>	<p>Nearly all of girls' speech is comprehensible by age three. On average, girls utter two to three times as many words per day as boys and speak twice as fast.</p>
<p>Boys learn to read at a slower rate than girls.</p>	<p>Girls learn to read one year to eighteen months earlier than boys.</p>
<p>Body secretes less serotonin, making boys more impulsive, fidgety; also secretes less oxytocin and vasopressin, making them less sensitive to signs of pain or distress in others.</p>	<p>Body secretes more serotonin, making it easier for girls to modulate their moods and regulate emotional expression; also secretes more oxytocin and vasopressin, making girls quick to respond to signs of pain or distress in others.</p>
<p>To comfortably hear a speaker, boys require the person's voice to be six to eight decibels louder than girls require. Boys have a higher tolerance for background noise.</p>	<p>Neural connectors that create listening skills are more developed in the female brain. Girls can discern voices at lower decibels and also can discriminate nuances of tone better than boys. Girls hear better at higher frequencies. They are more easily annoyed or distracted by background noise.</p>
<p>Boys process visual cues differently than girls; they are drawn to cool colors and motion, are better at seeing in bright light.</p>	<p>Girls are drawn to warm colors, faces, textures. During the first three months of life, baby girls will increase eye contact and mutual gazing by 400 percent; boys' gazing does not increase. Girls remain more attuned to facial expressions and body language than boys. Girls are superior at seeing in low light.</p>
<p>Autonomic nervous system in males (which regulates internal organ functions like heart rate, blood pressure, and digestion) causes them to react to stress or confrontation with excitement. Their senses are sharpened and they feel exhilarated.</p>	<p>Autonomic nervous system in females causes them to respond to extreme stress by freezing in place and/or feeling sick, dizzy, nauseated, fearful.</p>

Appendix

Boys	Girls
<p>Boys have higher levels of testosterone; however, levels vary widely. Testosterone leads boys to express social energy through aggression and attempts at dominance.</p>	<p>Girls have higher levels of estrogen and progesterone, the “bonding” hormone. Girls use social energy to form attachments and alliances with peers and adults. They also experience stronger and more rapid fluctuations of mood.</p>
<p>Boys take longer to process emotional stimulation; they are more emotionally fragile than girls and harder to soothe.</p>	<p>Girls process emotions via more senses than do boys and are able to articulate and process emotionally evocative experiences more effectively. Their wider informational stream (for example, the ability to read others’ facial expressions) can cause girls to take things more personally.</p>
<p>Boys do not seek out eye contact as often as do girls and are more verbally communicative when seated beside someone who seeks their attention and during shared physical activity.</p>	<p>Girls seek out and react positively to eye contact, face-to-face verbal communication, nodding, and smiling.</p>

Notes

Author's Note

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Chapter 1. The Audience Is Listening

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Chapter 2. The Great Cathedral Space of Childhood

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Chapter 3. The Biggest, Strongest, Fastest

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Chapter 4. The Boss, the Bestie, the High Priestess of Pretend

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Chapter 5. Hard Topics

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Chapter 6. Spirit Guides in Disguise

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Chapter 9. *The Opinionators*

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Chapter 10. *The Trustees*

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Appendix

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Reading Group Guide

Welcome! This discussion guide was developed to help parents who would like to participate in a book group or parenting class using the concepts in *Voice Lessons for Parents* as a foundation. There are many venues in which you can use the ideas in the guide, including:

- Book club discussion groups
- Grade-level parent meetings at your child's school
- Faculty in-service workshops
- Community center or neighborhood parent support groups
- Individual guidance while reading *Voice Lessons for Parents*
- Online chat groups

Setting Up a Parenting Class or Discussion Group

If you're interested in gathering a group of parents together to discuss issues of concern, below are some general guidelines you may find useful

Size and Participants

Parent groups can range from a minimum of six members for informal parent support groups to up to twenty participants for professionally led parenting classes. With fewer than six members you run the risk that typical rates of attrition, plus one or two parents home with a sick child or a competing commitment, may leave the group with only two members—intimate but without the potential for the same vitality and shared learning that a larger group affords. A good group size is twelve. Classes work best when the parents have children in the same age range: early elementary, later elementary, middle school, or high school.

When and Where

Groups can meet in members' homes or after drop-off or pick-up at school. Weekdays work well for parents with flexible schedules, but weeknights or weekends make sense for others.

Length and Frequency

No matter how dedicated and enthusiastic, every group needs ten minutes for the arrival of stragglers and for settling in and warming up. An hour and forty-five minutes to two hours is an ideal group length. With less time the group is not worth the effort of investing in child care and travel.

Weekly meetings for six consecutive weeks work well for parenting classes with a designated leader and structured curriculum. Leaderless support groups often meet less frequently (biweekly or monthly) but continue for months or even years.

Rules For Parenting Groups

Some guidelines will help things run smoothly. During the first meeting, the group can decide whether or not a set of explicit guidelines is needed. Here are some rules groups have adopted:

- Meeting times will be established during the first meeting and won't be changed to accommodate the schedules of individual group members.
- No recording of the meeting for spouse or friends.
- Out of courtesy, any group member who is unable to attend the next upcoming meeting will alert the leader or designated person in charge of organizational details.
- Since latecomers distract others, everyone will make the commitment to arrive on time.
- For classes held at the school attended by the children: the topics of the administration, teachers, and curriculum are off limits.
- Phrase comments in positive terms, do not criticize one another, and respect opinions that diverge from your own.
- Parents agree to keep what is said in the group confidential. Confessions, complaints, and problems will not be repeated outside of the group.
- No one should be pressured to reveal anything about themselves or their family if they choose not to. If group members are responding to questions "around the table," any member can decline to speak by saying, "I pass."

Discussing Voice Lessons for Parents

This guide includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your understanding of the principles presented in the book. The suggested questions are intended to help you recognize cultural pressures that create obstacles to rich family communication and target both habits you wish to break and strengths you want to preserve. We hope these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Exploring these ideas in a group setting (in person or online!) has a dual purpose: you can support each other as you try out new approaches and techniques while practicing the deeply pleasurable art of conversation . . . with one another.

Introduction

In *Voice Lessons for Parents*, *New York Times*–bestselling author and renowned parenting expert Wendy Mogel offers an essential guide to the new art of talking to children and shows how a change in voice can transform conversations and ease the relationships between parents and children. Delving into sources as diverse as neuroscience, fairy tales, and anthropology, Mogel offers specific guidance for talking to children across the expanse of childhood and adolescence. She also explains the best ways to talk about your child to grandparents, partners, and exes, and to teachers, coaches, and caretakers. Throughout the book, Mogel addresses an obstacle that flummoxes even the most seasoned and confident parent: the distraction of digital devices, how they impact our connection with our families, and what we can do about it.

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Dr. Mogel highlights a study that found a 71-percent increase in schoolchildren needing expert help for speech and language difficulties between 2007 and 2011—the early years of the iPhone. How do you moderate your own use of devices and your children’s screen time? What approaches have you tried that were ineffective? What old-school tactics or novel hacks are working in your family?
2. Dr. Mogel talks about the concept of making deposits in the “bank of goodwill.” Advertisers work hard to convince children that what they want is what they need. How can your family resist the allure of a consumer model of happiness and embrace practices that “make memories”? How do you define goodwill differently for each child?
3. Discuss some of the daily obstacles to the art of listening. Discuss the payoffs you’ve experienced.
4. Discuss ways to apply the model of being a fellow traveller and creativity curator in the realms of your child’s natural worries, expansive imagination, and bad dreams.
5. Many parents struggle to find a balance—when to protect a child and when to loosen the reins. How do you decide when to back off and let your child learn on his or her own versus when to step in? Share a time you graciously provided needed support. Share the benefits you’ve reaped by allowing your child to problem-solve independently.
6. The internet bombards children with all sorts of information, regardless of their age. From sex and violence to society’s beauty ideals and beyond, it’s a scary place to navigate, even for adults. After reading *Voice Lessons for Parents*, how might you approach the topic of media literacy with your child?
7. Mogel quotes Virginia Woolf when referring to the “great cathedral space” of childhood and posits, as Woolf does, that parents should be at the center. What does this mean to you? How do you envision the cathedral—and your position within it—changing as your child grows and matures?
8. When, where, and how do you and your partner in parenting talk about your child? How do you approach conversations with your child’s coaches, teachers, or other caretakers? What do you wish to do differently? What approaches might you consider even though they may tax your self-discipline or are not the norm in your community?

9. Mogel frequently highlights an aspect of parental anxiety that she refers to as “AP Parenting”—the notion that every decision has to be the right one. How are unrealistic standards of flawless parenting defined in your community? How can you gather courage to resist a “compare and despair” mode of judging yourself and your child? How can you reassure yourself that is not harmful to tell your child that you’ve changed your plans?
10. Think back to a few of the fights you have had with your teenager. Do these conversations follow any particular patterns? What would be a more productive way to resolve conflict and enjoy your time together?
11. Mogel refers to teenagers as “spirit guides in disguise.” When has your teenager taught you something or said something that surprised you? Discuss.
12. Mogel has plenty of warnings about too much screen time—whether it’s iPhones or video games or just too much TV. But she also suggests tech as a great way to bridge the gap with your kids, especially teenagers. Brainstorm some tech-based activities you and your child can do together.
13. Think about the most recent conversation you had with your child. What did you talk about? After reading *Voice Lessons for Parents*, can you identify ways to enhance, enrich, or streamline the communication?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Put away your phones. Too often, our cell phones and screens are dragging our attention away from where it should be—our work, our friends, our spouses, and our kids. Try keeping your phones out of sight for one meeting. See how it goes.
2. Role play! Pick a partner and act out the kind of recurring tense morning interchange, after-school inquisition, homework battle, or road trip emotional blow-out you might have with your child. Now try it again in “Voice Lessons mode,” testing out some of Mogel’s tips for moderating your speech tempo, tone, volume, and pitch.
3. Select one or two titles from Dr. Mogel’s “Recommended Reading” list and continue the conversation!