

Personal Workbook for

*Great advice!
Makes perfect sense.*

Tanya Rivera
Wall Street Journal

*This book's insights come
in bite-size nuggets that...
contain potent tools.*

Elizabeth Breau
ForeWord Reviews

10

**Second
Edition**



*Every parent wishes that newborns
came with an instruction manual,
and this book comes pretty close.*

IPPY Gold Medal Winner
Best Parenting Book

Powerful Things to Say to Your Kids



*Creating the relationship you want with
the most important people in your life*

Paul Axtell

Copyright © 2019 by Paul Axtell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced
in whole or in part without written permission of the publisher
except in reviews or critical writing.

Design by Cheryl McLean

JACKSON CREEK PRESS
2150 Northwest Jackson Creek Drive
Corvallis, Oregon 97330
info@jacksoncreekpress.com

More resources available at
paulaxtell.com

What kids hear us say

Twenty-some years ago, a class participant brought me a list ranking the thirty statements children hear most from adults.

1. No! (The answer most often heard)
2. Don't give me those excuses!
3. Let me put it another way.
4. I don't have time now; maybe later.
5. Do you think I'm made out of money?
6. Just wait until you have kids of your own.
7. What in the world do you think you are doing?
8. Don't eat a snack; dinner is almost ready.
9. Be nice to your little sister (brother) or else!
10. Clean your room.
11. When I was your age...
12. Are you lying to me?
13. Eat your dinner; there are children starving all over the world.
14. Can't you understand what I'm trying to tell you?
15. Can't you ever do (get) anything right?
16. Who do you think you are, anyway?
17. Why don't you grow up?
18. This is going to hurt me more than it will hurt you.
19. When are you ever going to learn?
20. Do it now!
21. Can't you kids get along with each other?
22. Why can't you be more like _____?
23. Go to your room!
24. Do your homework!
25. Don't use that tone of voice with me!
26. Shut up and listen to me!
27. You're not old enough to understand that yet.
28. Here, let me show you how to do it right.
29. I'm doing this for your own good.
30. Turn that radio down (off)!

Calvin: Sometimes when I'm talking, my words can't keep up with my thoughts. I wonder why we think faster than we speak.

Hobbes: Probably so we can think twice.

—Bill Watterson, creator of the
Calvin & Hobbes comic strip

As this list indicates, negative comments often shape the conversations parents have with their kids. At first blush, you may be dismayed by how many of these statements you can remember saying to your own kids. That certainly doesn't mean there is something wrong with you or with how you're raising your children. My point is simply that there is profound benefit in becoming more aware of what you say to your kids. Awareness gives you the choice to say something else, and therein lies the power. Awareness creates the opportunity for different conversations—conversations that open the door to more special moments with your children.

Don't lose your insights!

One of the ways we can change our behavior is to have an insight and then work with that insight until it becomes a habit. Research about the brain has informed my thinking about this:

- We actually have insights frequently. Our minds are connection machines—continually taking thoughts stored in different parts of our brains and making a connection between those thoughts.
- Energy is released upon having an insight, which helps propel us into action to capitalize on the insights we have.
- The energy released that helps us get into action dissipates within a few hours, making it more likely that the insight itself will disappear. This increases the importance of capturing our insights before we lose them.
- It is easy to create new habits from our insights. It does require that we find ways to reinforce the insight by practicing.

This is useful information for most of us who might have been operating from the view that our insights automatically translate to new behavior.

Recently I exchanged some e-mail with a friend who is working on being a great mom for her teenage daughter and keeping track of her observations.

Here are several of Terri's recent insights:

- I'm finding out that parenting is more about what I learn about myself rather than what Ashley is supposed to do.
- I am realizing that how I see things is much different from the way Ashley does.
- I am learning to let her finish her thoughts before I jump in.
- She makes me rethink things—it gives her a sense of empowerment just to know that when she asks something, I don't immediately have an answer, but that I will think about it.

I love Terri's first insight. It reminds me that kids are not only reacting to us, but we are reacting to them. All relationships can be seen as a dance—one person leading and the other following—sometimes we initiate the conversation and other times we respond. The point is to not to fall into a way of reacting that isn't consistent with who we want to be in life.

These two notions, captured by the following questions, are compelling because they each provide another lens through which we can reflect upon our interactions with our kids:

- Where and how am I reacting to my children?
- What am I learning about myself?

Sometimes an insight is worth a life's experience.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

Since I don't have daily interactions with my children or grandchildren, last night I reflected on a lifetime of interactions and rediscovered some of the insights I had over the years about myself when dealing with my children and grandchildren. Here are a few that helped me move toward being who I wanted to be:

- I was capable of being threatening to my kids when they were small even though I didn't see myself as a scary person.
- I had a difficult time letting my kids win at anything.
- I could say things I don't mean—and I know I don't mean them as I say them.
- It was hard to say "I'm sorry."
- I was uncomfortable hugging.
- I learned to cut way back on the teasing that might be hurtful.

I also had some more positive insights about myself:

- I am very willing to set the rest of the world aside and take time with children.
- I love watching kids learn and practice. It's one of the best things to do in life.
- I know I can't truly understand their reality, but trying to understand means a lot to them.

In all fields of life, consistent practice is required to increase skill level: cooking, a tennis serve, knitting, keyboarding, video games. It's no different with parenting skills. Realize that noticing *is* practicing. If you can capture the insights you have as you watch yourself respond to your kids, you can work with those insights until the behaviors become so ingrained, you are able to respond as you want to without even thinking about it.

Keep a journal of your insights

Reflection and noticing are the equivalent of practice, and from practice comes mastery. Recently, it occurred to me that journals serve another purpose. Anne Lamott in *Bird by Bird* says it simply: "Writing causes us to notice."

Learning from experience requires observation and reflection. To gain the value we might derive from both unique and everyday experiences requires that we notice. And writing both causes us to notice and helps us not to lose what we have noticed.

Learning from experience isn't automatic. When life gets hectic and you run out of quiet time for reflection, it's even more likely you will miss out on learning from your experiences. A journal is a deliberate commitment to make time for reflection and thinking. It's a way of enhancing what you learn from experience. A journal is also a resource you can later draw upon to rekindle an idea, add to your thinking, rebuild awareness, or find something to share with others. Ten minutes a day of making a few notes is all you need!

Use the pages in this personal workbook to record your insights and reflections about the book and how you might use what you discover to enrich your relationships in your family. And if you'd like to share your insights or experiences, I would love to hear from you! You can write to me at paulaxtell@mac.com.

The range of what we do is limited by what we fail to notice, and because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.

—Daniel Jay Goleman,
American psychologist

Something to think about...

Your kids would like more time with you. How can you make that happen?

What positive things do you tell others about your kids that you haven't shared with them?

Find a powerful perspective

Each person, each conversation, and each moment are what really matter.

This is perhaps the most powerful perspective for shaping a positive experience in many aspects of life and of parenting. You may be familiar with Tolstoy's "Three Questions," part of his collection *What Men Live By*:

- Where is the most important place?
- When is the most important time?
- Who is the most important person?

A wonderful retelling of Tolstoy's story by Jon J. Muth captures the answers beautifully:

Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side.

The point is to give your full attention to whatever you are doing and to whomever you are with right now—to remind yourself that this moment matters because it's where you are.

Clearly, the focus of this book has been on what to say to your kids. Within that discussion is the idea that our conversations create our relationships with one another. Let's consider relationships from a number of perspectives:

- Your kids want to have a relationship with you—yes, even when they are teenagers! All you have to do is give them a chance by showing genuine interest in them and making fewer judgments about them.
- Relationships take work. We simply can't take them for granted. Each week we need to explore how we are going to spend time together and how we can stay connected if we can't spend time together.
- Work on appreciating how life is for your kids. Even if you were a teenager once, it doesn't mean you know what it's like to be one now.
- Be responsible for making the relationship work—even if your kids aren't doing their part right now.
- Do everything you can to be less directing, less dominating, less controlling.
- Notice the conversations you are having—delete the ones that do not add value and add others that will.

Parenting is both a joy and a challenge. Give yourself some space around not having it all figured out—and still having the courage to keep trying. I'm clear that I don't have all the answers to being a successful parent. But I do believe the intention and perspective we choose make all the difference.

*Love knows not distance;
it hath no continent;
its eyes are for the stars.*

—Sir Gilbert Parker, British
novelist and politician

The art of reflection

Effective people find time for reflection. It's not easy because of the demands of life and the constant pull of distractions. Still, if you want to learn each day from your experiences, the practice of reflection is critical. Reflecting is different than noticing in the moment. Reflection occurs after an experience or at the end of the day. Effective people try to find time for at least forty-five minutes of reflection per day. Sounds impossible, doesn't it?

Try this. When you are in your car alone, don't turn the radio on. Two things might happen. If you have a problem in life, your mind will go to work on the problem. If you have no current problems, your mind will do something creative. This also applies to those times when you go for a run or walk, or hop onto the treadmill. I understand it's easier to get started if you have some great music playing on your iPod. But once you are into the walk, turn off the iPod and give your mind a chance to reflect.

Brain scientists say insights last from five minutes to five hours. Given the pace of our lives, I think it's probably five minutes for most of us. Build in some time for reflection, and you'll not only have more insights, you'll be able to hold on to them.

Our minds also need something to work with—we need to front-end load our minds with ideas and experiences. With respect to your kids, you have plenty of experiences each and every day. All you need to do is find some time to learn from those daily experiences. Revisiting a few pages in this book each week will help also. The following pages are designed to begin this practice of reflection.

Take some time to reflect on each chapter in this book. Use the questions below to go a little deeper in your understanding of yourself and your conversations in the family. You can do this alone, reflecting and thinking your way through each chapter. Or you might think through the questions with someone else. There is usually another level of clarity and more ideas are available in a conversation between two people. Either way, push yourself to keep asking, "What else?" It's a bit like peeling an onion—with layer upon layer of insights and ideas available to you.

- 1) *What did you find yourself thinking about as you read the chapter?*
- 2) *What part resonated with your own experience growing up or raising children?*
- 3) *What personal examples come to mind?*
- 4) *What insights have you had:*
 - *about yourself?*
 - *about each of your children?*
 - *about your interactions with your kids?*
- 5) *What do you see that you might try?*

Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful.

—Margaret J. Wheatley

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and Third by experience, which is the bitterest.

—Confucius, Chinese philosopher

one. I like you.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind.

“Pooh!” he whispered.

“Yes, Piglet?”

“Nothing,” said Piglet, taking Pooh’s paw.

“I just wanted to be sure of you.”

—A. A. Milne, English author

Things to try or look for:

- Make a list of thirty things I like about each of my kids.
- Look for opportunities to teach them how to do things.
- Ask my kids to teach me things.
- Put the world on hold whenever they talk to me.
- Write some notes to each of my kids.

-
-
-
-

four. How about we agree to...

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness, and drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.

—Miguel Angel Ruiz,
Mexican author

Things to try or look for:

- Ask family members for suggested agreements.
- Turn off all technology for a period of time each week.
- Notice what happens when setting technology aside.
- As a family, establish a family technology agreement.
-
-
-
-
-

five. Tell me more.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

*The most precious gift
we can offer anyone is
our attention.*

—Thich Nhat Hanh,
Buddhist monk

*When I talk about
deep listening, I mean
a practice in which
the listener is fully
present in that moment
with another human
being without any
judgment—an open
and compassionate
space where connection
and understanding can
take root.*

—Matt Hopwood,
British author

Things to try or look for:

- Set aside time each day to just listen to each child.
- Who would like me to interact with them more deeply?
- Where do I need more patience and less speaking?
- Ask people about their day so they want to answer.
- Practice asking *What else?* and waiting to hear more.
-
-
-
-

six. Let's play & let's read!

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

*Play is often talked about
as if it were a relief
from serious learning.
But for children,
play is serious learning.*

—Mr. Rogers

*The art of reading is
in great part that
of acquiring a better
understanding of life
from one's encounter
with it in a book.*

—André Maurois,
French author

Things to try or look for:

- Expose my kids to all kinds of sports; let them choose.
- Invite my kids to teach me some games.
- Ask my kids to tell me about the characters in their books.
- Be a good role model by reading for pleasure myself.
-
-
-
-
-

eight. I'm sorry.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

*An apology is the
superglue of life.
It can repair
just about anything.*

—Lynn Johnston, creator
of the comic strip
For Better or For Worse

*When correcting a child,
the goal is to apply light,
not heat.*

—Woodrow Wilson

*Remember, we all
stumble,
every one of us.
That's why it's a comfort
to go hand in hand.*

—Emily Kimbrough,
American author

Things to try or look for:

- Where might I need to apologize and clear the air?
- When someone apologizes to me, say thank you.
- Don't dwell on my mistakes; just apologize and move on.
- Give family members the freedom to express hurt feelings.
-
-
-
-
-
-

ten. Yes.

Reflections and observations from the questions on page 13:

Things to try or look for:

- What do I say frequently that usually turns out to mean no?
- Where can I say yes to show my trust in my child?
- Read the original list to my kids and ask, *What do I say often?*
- Keep track of how many times each week I say no.
- Discuss the situations where *no* is not negotiable.
-
-
-
-

To say yes, you have to sweat and roll up your sleeves and plunge both hands into life up to the elbows. It is easy to say no.

—Jean Anouilh,
French dramatist

Everywhere, people are discovering that doing things more slowly often means doing them better and enjoying them more. It means living life instead of rushing through it.

You can apply this to everything from food to parenting.

—Carl Honore, Canadian journalist

