

## Supportiveness: Dealing with a Child's Feelings (or Problems)

By Jane Bluestein, Ph.D. Reprinted with permission.

This handout lists both *non-supportive* and *supportive* responses to children's feelings and problems. While non-supportive responses can block communication and create mistrust, supportive responses help students determine what they want, which options are available (and won't create additional problems) and what they're going to do to make a situation better.

### Non-Supportive Responses

#### *Responses that attempt to make the feelings go away*

*Dynamic:* Attempts to protect children from their feelings, or to protect adults who are uncomfortable with children's feelings.

*Outcomes:* Child's self-doubt, confusion, mistrust of personal reality, need to "stuff" feelings. *Message:* Feelings are not OK.

#### **Examples:**

##### Dismissing/Minimizing

*"That's nothing to be upset over." "That doesn't mean anything." "So she called you a camel. Big deal!"* Discounts impact of an event or experience on the child; does not respect the validity or reality of his or her experience.

##### Excusing

*"She didn't mean it." "He didn't know what he was saying." "She must be having a bad day." "Well, you know, her parents are going through a divorce."* Rather than encouraging compassion (a valuable skill to teach *in a non-conflict time*) these responses are likewise disrespectful. They also carry the dangerous implication that as long as someone has an excuse, it's OK for them to be thoughtless or mean (or worse).

##### Denying

*"Oh, you don't really feel that way." "There's no such thing as monsters." "People shouldn't hate their brothers."* Just plain crazy-making; can confuse, distract; suggests that the child's reality isn't real.

##### Distracting

*"But you're so good in your other subjects." "Things could be worse." "You're lucky you have a brother." "You think you've got problems." "But his parents are so nice." "Cheer up! This is the best time in your life!"* Confusing; disrespectful of the child's reality and experience. Note that this last example may be one of the most dangerous things we can say to a young person, especially if he or she is feeling depressed or self-destructive.

### Medicating

Uses some type of substance (usually food) or activity (schoolwork, TV, chores, shopping) to distract children from their feelings. Can set up or reinforce an association between emotional discomfort and the need to get out of those feelings by taking or doing something.

## **Responses that make the child wrong for having feelings**

*Dynamic:* Serves as outlet for adult's anger, impatience, frustration, or feelings of inadequacy or shame triggered by child's feelings.

*Outcome:* Shame/wrongness; defensiveness; feelings not OK.

### **Examples:**

#### Attacking/Shaming

"I told you this would happen!" "Don't be a sissy." "You're so ungrateful!" "Nice boys don't hate their sisters." "You're just too sensitive." "How could you be so stupid!" OK, now the kid has two problems, and you're one of them. While this reaction may be natural, it's neither encouraging, accepting nor validating, nor does it build communication or emotional safety.

#### Blaming

"What did you do to her?" "Well, if you had just studied!" "Of course it died! You never changed the water!" "That's what happens when you overeat." The energy in this response is very similar to attacking and shaming (above), and like those responses, simply adds stress and defensiveness to the equation (and relationship).

#### Challenging

"Why does that bother you?" This response requires child to shift from the affect (feeling his feelings) to the cognitive (describing and explaining them). It asks the child to defend his feelings, and suggests the need to convince the adult that the feelings are legitimate in order to get the adult's approval or acceptance. Bottom line: It really doesn't matter why something is bothering someone; it just matters that it does.

#### Enmeshing

"Well I never had a problem with math." "So now you know how I feel." "Your problems really give me a headache." "That wouldn't bother me." Shifts focus from the child to the adult. Disrespectful of child's reality and experience. Confusing, distracting.

## **Responses that attempt to fix it or make it better**

*Dynamic:* Makes adult responsible for child's problems, allows adult to feel

important. Suggests a mistrust for child's ability to resolve problems. Also shifts out of affective experience (feeling a feeling) to cognitive process (solving a problem).

*Outcome:* Reduced sense of responsibility for problems (for child); lack of confidence in problem-solving abilities; helplessness; using feelings to get "rescued." Dismisses feelings in favor of action (a separate process that tends to go better when not undertaken in the throes of intense feelings).

### **Examples:**

#### Rescuing

*"Here. Let me see those math problems."* *"OK. You can have the car again next weekend if you have a good enough excuse for breaking curfew."* *"Look, I'll talk to your teacher about it."* *"That's OK. I'll pay those insurance premiums."* Takes responsibility for problem instead of listening, hearing, reflecting and holding other person accountable (which we can do and still be supportive, accepting and encouraging). Does not suggest trust for child's ability to solve problem and robs them of an opportunity to develop problem-solving skill or confidence in their ability to handle difficulties they encounter. Encourages dependence.

#### Advising

*"Go study and you won't feel so scared about that test."* *"Tell her how you feel."* *"You know if you cut your hair and lost five pounds you wouldn't feel that way."* *"Just ignore her."* Takes responsibility for problem. May not address actual problem; may create additional problems if advice is followed. This approach is often by adults who see the child's vulnerability as an opportunity to assert their own agendas. Distracts from affect. Does not suggest trust for child's ability to solve problem and robs them of an opportunity to develop problem-solving skill or confidence in their ability to handle difficulties they encounter. Encourages dependence, blame.

To become more responsive and supportive— not only in relationships with children, but with adults, as well— start paying attention to the responses you rely on most frequently. Avoiding these non-supportive patterns, common though they may be, can make an enormous difference in the connection you have with others.

## **The Alternative: Supportive Responses**

The alternative to non-supportive responses is asking questions that allow you to put the responsibility for solving a particular problem on the child. The process is almost like throwing a ball back to him over and over, even though it will almost always seem easier to

just catch the ball (the problem) and run with it yourself.

Remember, you want to help him get a better grip on what's going on in a particular situation, and to determine what he wants, which options are available (and won't create additional problems) and what he's going to try to make it better or make it right. Be careful that you don't simply run down this list, bombarding your child with a series of questions. Please do not "drill" your students or get impatient to ask the next question. This is not a script, and the process is what's important—not the questions.

The next time a child trusts you enough to come to you with a problem, watch the tendency to offer solutions or advice. Try this process and watch how smart even young children can be.

### **Some Sample Questions**

- What happened?
- What would you like to happen next?
- What do you think will (or might) happen next?
- How do you think you'll feel later (or afterwards)?
- How would you feel if that happened to you?
- What have you tried so far?
- What's worked for you in the past?
- What else could you try?
- What kind of back-up plans do you have if that doesn't work?
- What have you tried that's worked with this person?
- What have you tried that's worked in similar situations?
- What are you risking by doing that?
- Is it worth it?
- How can you take care of yourself in this situation?
- How would you like him/her to treat you?
- What do you plan to say?
- What seems to work for the other kids?
- If you had a magic wand, how would you make this turn out?
- What do you think the other person wants?
- What have you just agreed to?
- Will that create any problems for you?
- Will that create any problems for anyone?
- What if you change your mind?
- What else might you try?
- What have you learned from this?
- What are you going to do the next time you're tempted to do that?
- How are you going to avoid this problem in the future?

- How are you going to prevent this problem in the future?
- Is this helping?
- How important is it for you to (pass this class, get the part, make the team...)?
- What are you willing to do to (pass this class, get the part, make the team...)?
- What will happen if you don't (pass this class, get the part, make the team...)?
- How will you know if that's a good choice?
- What would you have to do differently to make this work?
- What are you willing to change?
- How can you find out?
- What questions do you have?
- How do you think you might handle this the next time it occurs?
- What do you wish you could say to this person?
- Do you want the situation to change?
- How do you want the situation to change?
- Are you willing to consider other options?
- What will you do the next time you run into him/her?
- What does this person want you to do to make things right?
- What might you propose as an alternative?
- What will happen if you get caught?
- Would you like to talk about it?
- Would you like to talk to someone else about this?
- Can you live with that?
- What are you being blamed for?
- What parts of this situation are beyond your control?
- What parts of this situation are within your control (or influence)?
- What are the limits (or criteria or deadlines) in this situation?
- How much time do you need to decide?
- What if you're OK the way you are?
- What would that sound like?
- How are you going to follow up on this?
- When are you going to follow up on this?
- What do you wish this other person would do?
- If the situation doesn't change, how can you take care of yourself?
- What bothers you the most about this situation?
- What do you like best about this person?
- Do you want to solve this problem?
- Do you need more time to think about it?
- Do you want me to leave you alone?

Excerpted and adapted from *The Win-Win Classroom*, revised edition, by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.  
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