

It's Not **What** You Say,

“Everyone’s So Tense All the Time”

“When there is no more blame or criticism in your eyes, when you are able to look at others with compassion, you see things very differently. You speak differently. The other person can sense you are truly seeing her and understanding her, and that already eases her pain significantly.”

—THICH NHAT HANH



It's *How* You Say It

Elaine Taylor-Klaus, MCC, CPCC

ONE OF MY BEST FRIENDS USED TO LIVE NEXT DOOR, and our combined six kids flowed comfortably in and out of each other's homes. Our house had a constant swirl, an unmistakable energy that seemed to spill across every open surface and threshold. Our neurotypical friend's home reflected his relatively quiet and subdued energy. Everything was in its place, no clutter to be found. Recently he confessed that there was a limit to the time he could spend in our home. He loved us, but it was too chaotic. He needed to retreat and regroup.

And so it is. There are beautiful moments in our lives with complex kids. We live for those moments. But sometimes there's a surreal layer that makes it hard to keep a sense of humor as drama unfolds. We get overwhelmed by the chaos and heavily burdened by disappointment. Sometimes we bear the weight with guilt or shame. It's truly a madman's paradise.

Upheaval is a normal part of everyone's life. Starting a school year or ending it, changing jobs, or even finding a new babysitter are times when we expect life's transitions to be a bit more challenging. But when the basic events of daily life routinely throw things off balance, it's not usually the kind of change you post on social media.

Most of us have experienced some of these moments. We've

- sat, head in hands, feeling powerless because you hear someone you love "losing it" in another room.
- witnessed a child spend hours torturing themselves over what "should" be ten minutes of schoolwork.
- unleashed, aware we're saying things we'll deeply regret.
- scripted a thousand things to say in our heads, only to remain silent, day after day, week after week.
- felt like we're walking on eggshells, afraid to trigger a storm.

- listened to a child scream or watched them unravel, feeling powerless and unable to soothe or calm them.
- stood by feeling helpless as a child is hitting walls, throwing punches, and wreaking havoc.
- watched a child self-sabotage or quit on themselves.

In complex families, simple, everyday transitions cause uncertainty, which creates chaos. It's a hallmark of our kids' challenges that they don't deal well with transitions, and it's difficult to embrace change with open arms when smooth-running systems are easily derailed.

And so, we often feel disappointed or resentful, like we're failing our kids, failing at parenting, teaching, or life. We don't want to go home after work, or to plan family outings or new class activities, because the mere thought of "togetherness" makes us want to run away. We hate to admit that all too often we don't like these kids very much, so we begin to stop liking ourselves instead.

Transition is a hallmark of educating a child, and chaos is (generally speaking) a key foundation of family life. But with complex kids, we may feel like we're living in chaos on steroids. The only constant in life is change, which can be a wondrous adventure or an ominous, threatening

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taskmaster. Because not knowing is a fundamental component of our worlds, it helps to embrace the chaos—to understand and expect it, even respect and befriend it.

COACH’S REFRAME

Create a Positive Tone of the Home

I asked a group of third-grade girls to take turns in front of the room asking the same question: “Would you take your backpack off the table please?” Before each turn, I called out an emotion to express: kind, angry, impatient, sweet, annoyed, hungry, supportive, loving, hateful, sarcastic. The girls loved the game, laughing a lot. The mothers in the back of the room heard themselves in their daughters’ voices. They didn’t always like what they heard.

ARE YOU SECRETLY CALLING YOUR CHILD AN IDIOT?

Communication is contextual, happening in words, tone, expression, and gesture. Our choices can be empowering:

- “Yes, and . . .” instead of “but” can disarm defense mode.
- “Could” instead of “should” offers authentic choice and control.
- “What do you think?” instead of “Why don’t you . . . ?” empowers ownership and independence.

Sometimes we inadvertently sabotage communication. We think we’re masking frustration, disappointment, fear, judgment, shame, or blame, but our kids hear the truth in our tone, or our words tell another story:

- “What were you thinking?” (“You’re an idiot.”)
- “What on Earth?” (“You can’t do anything right.”)
- “For the tenth time . . .” (“You have no respect.”)
- “Are you sure?” (“I don’t trust you.”)
- “Have you done what I asked?” (“You slacker.”)
- “Why didn’t you?” (“You’re doomed to fail.”)

It’s curious how we’re cautious with those we don’t know, polite when addressing authority (“yes, ma’am”), and considerate when speaking to strangers (“please, go ahead”). But to our loved ones we can be downright mean, without meaning to be. Whatever makes you most frustrated or concerned is subtly expressed in your tone.

To shift your thoughts to improve your communication, try this:

1. Think about your worst fears or concerns for your child. Say it out loud and try to identify the tone you’re unwittingly expressing in your voice.
2. Ask your spouse or BFF what worry tends to sneak out in your tone. Narrow it down to the 1 to 3 most likely messages.
3. Get curious about what else is also true besides your fears. Consider new thoughts that might be more helpful.



BEYOND TONE OF VOICE, TONE OF THE HOME

Whether you call it searching for a silver lining or spin control, a positive mindset will guide you to create a tone in your home that improves family life.

While negativity is toxic and breeds more negativity, positivity can help make a difficult situation better. When you shift your perspective (and the words and tone to reflect it) from adversarial to cooperative, it paves the way to better outcomes.

Positivity isn’t just about being nice. It’s about interpreting a situation in such a way that improves the future. It’s not that Anne Frank kept a diary that was so spectacular, it’s that she kept a positive perspective even in the face of some of the worst atrocities known to humankind that gave her story its impact and longevity.

Sometimes the details of what homework didn’t get turned in, what chore didn’t get done, or who’s standing up at dinner should take a back seat to helping your child feel confident, connected, and loved. Let some things slide in the interest of helping kids see their strengths and feel supported.

To be honest, you might look at your sloppy teen hiding behind earphones, drumming at the table, and think, “ungrateful freeloader” while you ask him to “pass the butter, please.” You’re human, and they’re frustrating at times. The

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challenge is to manage your tone of voice until you can redirect your thoughts to something more constructive for everyone.

What's good for our kids is actually great for us (and our relationships). To create a positive tone in your home when it feels like every day you're sinking into quicksand, keep focused on yourself, your child, and your relationships with each other. Let your kids know that you'll be there for them, even when things don't go the way you want. Conversation by conversation, focus on communicating with a positive tone of voice; over time, that will lead you to influence the tone of your home, creating a foundation for success that will last a lifetime—your child's lifetime.

STRATEGY

Play to Their Strengths

When my eldest child fell in love with acting during a third-grade after-school Shakespeare class, I had never seen them thrive in quite that way, no matter what therapies, doctors, or medicines they tried. Acting class was a win and became a constant. I joke that it was cheaper than therapy, but truthfully, I saw them light up and sensed it was essential. In a twist I never would have anticipated, playing to their strength turned into a career that changed their life forever.

This applies to adults, as well. When I learned what I call the maxim of ADHD coaching—play to your strengths and outsource your challenges—it changed my life. As I began to play to my strengths, I hired a bookkeeper to manage the *administrivia* that was bogging me down. I found a business partner in Diane Dempster, who complemented my skills. I learned to ask for help and stopped trying to be everything to everyone. Playing to my strengths freed me up for personal and professional success.

In the world of complex kids, playing to your strengths—and leveraging them appropriately—is a fundamental tactic. Its value cannot be overestimated. The following excerpt from an interview with Dr. Stephen Hinshaw during the 2019 ADHD Parent's Palooza offers an insight relevant to *all* kids:

“You've got a kid who is not a traditional learner. You've got a kid who is not the world's most organized person in terms of binders and backpacks and whatever, but who's more creative than others. Maybe you've got some of those traits yourself. Appreciate it!

“... If you cut through what people have been studying about what makes kids tick, for many generations now, if you could do one single thing, it would be to find something your kid loves and is good at and give them every opportunity to practice it and express that. This is a thought experiment, because we live in a world where there's a lot of pressures, and kids need treatment, parents need treatment. But this is where strength-based approaches to resilience are really important.

“Maybe your kid doesn't get fabulous grades in school; but man are they musical, or artistic, or athletic. Or maybe they're not so good socially because it's just overwhelming for them; but you get them in an individual task or connections online, and there's

ways for kids to connect with other people without some of the stresses of being in a group all the time. Families need to figure out what you're good at, and reinforce the heck out of that, and give opportunities, not just dwelling on the negative. If I could give one piece of advice, that would be it.” He continued, “stamp collecting, or playing with bugs, or the nontraditional sport that they're really good at, or music.... Help your kid find that area that they really enjoy and are good at and let them thrive in it.

“Because in the long run, the building of legitimate self-esteem, and the building of self-confidence from doing... I mean that's what keeps all of us going. Find something that you're really good at, you really enjoy doing, and then if you can do that, a lot of other stuff ends up going along for the ride with that.”

Your kids have challenges. Instead of allowing them to be defined by them, let them be defined by their strengths and gifts. Find what they love and let them dive into it. Don't take them out of art class if they love art, just for more math tutoring. Focus on those things that make them feel terrific about themselves, as they're the source of future success. Don't keep it a secret either. More than likely, your child is frustrated too, and a reminder of their successes will make you both feel fabulous!

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Say No to Perfectionism

For most of my life, I avoided failure at all costs. I pursued only opportunities at which I could excel and avoided anything I didn't do well. Narrowing my options reinforced an unhealthy fear of failure, and I let fear of striking out prevent me from playing the game.

And then, I was gifted with a child significantly challenged by the complexities of life and learning. Their path veered outside the lines, which turned out to be my greatest teacher (despite my initial reluctance to be its student).

For years, I railed against my child's differences and danced around the edges of their “issues,” buying diagnoses and therapies, trying everything in my power to ensure that my smart kid would be successful. I was determined that their life would be “normal,” which in some twisted way meant perfect. But I was on a fool's errand.

Early in their elementary years, I started to learn a powerful lesson: To be the best parent possible for them, I had to let go of other people's definitions of success and stop dragging them, kicking and screaming, to my definition of their success. It took years to come to terms with my own “failure” to raise a “perfect” child. By the time that child was twelve, I became a perfectionist

in recovery, though there were no twelve steps in my program. Instead every day, I made the effort to see failure as an excellent teacher (alongside success).

To recognize, embrace, and accept complex kids for the humans they are and let go of some ideal notion of who they should be, we must shed our outdated notions of perfectionism that leave us all feeling broken and worthless. When kids feel that perfection is the only acceptable standard, they tend to respond in one of two ways:

- Anxiety takes over, driving every action and decision, robbing them of feeling a sense of satisfaction in any accomplishment.
- Nothing is ever good enough, so eventually they give up and stop trying. It still stings that I was part of creating this truth for my child: “Don’t you see, Mom? If I don’t do it, then I haven’t done it wrong!”

A drive for excellence leads to self-improvement and achievement, and there’s nothing wrong with that. You’re reading this article to improve the dynamic in your relationships with your kids, right? The challenge is to keep that drive from becoming tyrannical, to allow some things in life to be good enough. Focus on progress, not perfection.

Diane taught me a strategy to keep perfectionist demons at bay: G.E.M.O., which stands for Good Enough Move On. We use it in our company all the time. When you’re working on a project or guiding your kids to learn something, notice when something is good enough and it’s time to move on. Maybe you don’t need to refold those shirts, reload the dishwasher, or correct those spelling sentences. What if they’re actually good enough?

If you tend to insist on perfection, what might help you focus on your child’s strengths? I’m not asking you to abandon values of achievement, but notice when those values interfere with your relationships, sleeping peacefully, and feeling calm or even happy. The distinction between excellence and perfectionism is a fine line that a lot of us dance around, and we want to do that consciously, noticing when it gets in the way and when it helps.

Perfectionism works against us and our kids. Managing our own perfectionism models acceptance and a more realistic approach to achievement. At the end of the day, a 90 is still an A. Ask yourself—is that good enough?

Say Yes to Radical Compassion

Years ago, facilitator Shannon Kelly guided me through a Bigger Game workshop (created by Rick Tamlyn). I was seeking clarity about my mission to create a global resource for parents of complex kids. I can still feel the choke in my voice as I responded to her question about my purpose: “. . . so that no child will ever grow up feeling the way I did.”

Three scraps of paper pinned on my office wall have moved with me from one space to another. They remind me of how hard it is to be a complex child, and the powerful benefits of parenting with a coach approach. The first two quotes arrived shortly after I started coaching, when my preteen started to share what they

were feeling because I was open to listening. These words struck me as sad and poignant:

“I don’t mean to be so dysfunctional.”

“The minute she started yelling at me, I put it out of my mind.”

Another message, written on a cute little sticky note in their handwriting a few years later, after I started practicing radical compassion, fills me with hope:

“When life kicks you, let it kick you forward [sic].

Be proud and unafraid to make mistakes. Be you.”

Radical compassion gives you permission to feel for your kids’ experience, an access point to empower them to see what’s possible for themselves, instead of only focusing on what they feel is “broken.”

When we’re exasperated and exhausted, at the end of a long day or at the beginning of an overextended week, with too many commitments and too little time, it’s hard to remember that our kids are suffering. We just want them to behave, or follow directions, or do what’s expected of them, so we can do what’s expected of us. We easily forget that what we see as a simple hurdle to overcome, they may experience as an insurmountable mountain. Complex kids are struggling.

My clients tell me that they say things to their kids that they regret. They’re worried about their kids’ self-esteem or concerned that their kids are apathetic and lazy. Driven to teach, guide, shape, and prepare kids for the big, bad world, they feel mandated to hold them accountable, applying just punishments and appropriate consequences—a signal to the world that they take their role seriously, are responsible adults, and are in control.

Parents try threats, idle warnings, and removal of privileges. We take away everything until there’s nothing left to take away. It’s hard to remember our kids aren’t avoiding work just to be rude, difficult, or disrespectful. They don’t have a mechanism to get themselves activated, organized, or self-regulated. And they find that embarrassing (and demoralizing). They certainly don’t need us reminding them constantly, much less making them feel bad about it.

Your kids want to be seen, heard, and understood. They want their perspective and experience to matter. They want to know that you’re on their team. That’s how you will successfully guide them to independence.

Shame and blame will not help your child perform better. It damages your relationships, reducing your child’s ability to trust you, reinforcing negative self-images, and making it harder for



kids to get their stuff done. If they feel like you don't really understand what it's like for them, why should they bother trying?

I'm not saying that all you need is love and connection, but strong relationships are at the core of helping children improve their behaviors. Radical compassion gives you permission to feel for your kids' experience, an access point to empower them to see what's possible for themselves, instead of only focusing on what they feel is "broken."

SELF-TALK

Make It Okay to Make Mistakes (and Stop the Lying)

Sarah Blakely, founder of Spanx, attributes her father's celebration of mistakes as a key factor to her success. Despite her lack of experience, it never occurred to her that she couldn't do it. Similarly, we wouldn't have potato chips, the Slinky, Scotch Guard, the pacemaker, fireworks, Post-it notes, or chocolate chip cookies without mistakes. Alexander Fleming forgot to clean his petri dishes in the lab before he closed the windows and left for vacation. He came back to a moldy mess—and changed the course of medical history with the discovery of penicillin.

Even though mistakes are a fundamental component of human success, we tend to freak out when we or our kids make them. And when kids feel wrong all the time, their self-esteem diminishes and they cover up, stop trying, or create ways to be right. On coaching calls, Diane and I frequently hear:

- "My son said he'd done his homework, but he hadn't."
- "He lied to me."
- "She looked me in the eye and lied about it."
- "I caught them in another lie."

Here's the truth: Kids lie. All the time. Even the really earnest, rule following kids. Lying is exaggerated with complex kids—not because they're less honest, but because self-preservation leads to them to deny and defend themselves so that they don't feel that they

are always wrong. I call it "defensive dishonesty." And we parents are partially to blame:

- We constantly correct kids, from little redirections to big lectures, exhausting everyone.
- Kids are literal and unsure when lies are okay. We tell them "Say you're sorry" when they aren't, or "Mom's not home" to avoid a phone call. Because kids intend to do their homework, can't they say it's already done?
- We're determined to catch them in a lie for their own good.

But you can create an environment that makes it okay to make mistakes by accepting that it's "normal" for a complex child to be physically or mentally overactive, impulsive, or whatever. You can take the shame, blame, annoyance, and embarrassment out of corrections and redirections. Make mistakes as matter-of-fact as possible. Model positive reactions ("Whoops, I broke the kitchen faucet"), teach that mistakes are learning experiences ("Next time, I'll read the instruction manual"), and take the pressure off of everyone to always have to "get it right."

To make it okay to make mistakes, try to

- Limit corrections and save redirections for what's important.
- Keep a sense of humor when you make corrections.
- Have "no correction" time with your kids (don't tell them; just don't correct anything that's not dangerous).
- Laugh at life's silly mistakes.
- Be open to constructive criticism and suggestions
- Make mistakes matter-of-fact.
- Apply a scientific approach to what works and what doesn't.
- Verbalize mistakes (without making yourself wrong for them).

"Isn't it cute that you think you're going to remember?" I ask my child with working memory challenges, followed by "What are you going to do to help yourself remember?" That same kid is likely to say playfully, "I don't know what you mean, Mom, of course I didn't leave my dirty dishes in the family room; what would you expect of me?" while he's belatedly bringing the dishes to the kitchen. Sure, I could yell at him for not doing it originally. Or I could thank him for taking care of it with good humor, keeping a positive tone in our home, and reinforcing our connected relationship.

Mistakes are going to happen—more in our homes than others—and our reaction to them really matters. Maybe you don't need to pick your mistakes out of the trash like Sir Fleming, but you can hold them lightly and remove the stigma for everyone. We are, as my eldest child likes to say, perfectly imperfect. 🍌



Elaine Taylor-Klaus, PCC, CPCC, has worked as a virtual coach for parents of complex kids, ages four to forty-four, for more than a decade. The author of *The Essential Guide to Raising Complex Kids with ADHD, Anxiety, and More*, she has supported thousands of parents across the globe in training programs, group coaching, and private coaching as the co-founder of [ImpactParents.com](https://www.impactparents.com).