



**THINGS
WE
SHOULD
NEVER
SAY TO
KIDS**

JIM HANCOCK

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Thing Seven

“Let Me Tell You What Happened Here”

Everybody’s an expert.

OK, everybody’s not really an expert but it’s nice to look wise now and again.

It’s just that, sometimes, silence is the best part of wisdom. Like, for example, when you have the choice between explaining something to a child and encouraging him to puzzle it out for himself.

Explaining what a kid could figure out puts him on intellectual welfare. You end up communicating, even if you don’t mean to, that you are here to do his thinking for him. Which, to be clear, is not a good thing. Because intellectual welfare, like its analogue in the social sector, seldom raises people much above the subsistence level.

Explaining, I think, is one of the principle problems with conventional education (you may notice this theme elsewhere in this book—I don’t mean to harp; I’m just saying we can do better). Explaining has more to do with the teacher than the student. It’s more about telling

than learning. This strikes me as just about completely upside down. Honestly, it makes very little difference what the teacher knows if she knows how to teach. The best teaching produces students equipped to learn so well that they are all but guaranteed to find out way more than the teacher knows.

What's true in the classroom is also true of lessons learned in living rooms and kitchens at home and in the parks and food courts where kids encounter their peers. When kids face unfamiliar circumstances, when they try and fail in relationships, as they certainly will, adults need to engage them with more than an explanation of how things work and where they went wrong. We fail them as teachers if we don't respect them as learners.

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Exploring is how people learn. The *explorer* uses questions to boost the learner's position; the *explainer* uses statements to maintain his own. The language of expertise is, "Let me tell you something." The language of exploring is, "Let me ask you something."

Let's say, for example, a kid makes an error in judgment that causes her to return home two hours later than expected. The *explorer* takes a deep breath, thanks God his daughter is safe and begins asking questions.

The *explainer*, on the other hand, takes a deep breath, thanks God his daughter is safe, and then proceeds to kill her; to smother her under a mountain of explanations about where she went wrong; hammering her with a catalogue of ways she is irresponsible and ill-suited for life on this planet.

“What do you think happened here?” is exploring, assuming it's a sincere question and not a trap. An honest and complete answer to this question gets two people well down the road of understanding each other.

The beauty of exploring is it doesn't matter whether the outcome of the original action was positive, negative or neutral. There's always something to be learned by exploring.

Whether you're figuring out how to repeat a success or avoid repeating a failure, exploring is just plain better than explaining.

- “I’m confused; walk me through the steps so I can understand.”
- “Tell me how you decided to approach the problem.”
- “How did you come up with that idea?”
- “How did you figure out your first approach wasn’t working?”
- “What surprises did you encounter along the way?”
- “What did you learn from your experience?”
- “Would you do it again the same way?”
- “What would you change?”
- “Did you ever experience anything like that before?”

When a child retraces her steps she sees how one thing led to another, where she chose wisely and where she went wrong. She makes connections between one thing and another that will enable her to succeed over and over and keep her from falling in the same hole twice.

When she gets good at it, exploring reveals how things work (whereas explaining mainly reveals what works and what doesn't, and only from the point of view of the Explainer). Over time, that kind of learning is transformed to wisdom.

But wait, there's more.

Lots of kids—maybe most—grow up convinced that others have magical powers of understanding.¹⁴ They get this conviction from the way people just seem to *know* things. An uncle listens to a car idling and says, “She’s running a little rich; I’d adjust that.” How does he know that? A family friend bakes consistently perfect pies. What’s her secret? A child who learns to explore rather than waiting for an explanation learns to ask questions that yield valuable information about fuel to air ratios and how refrigerating a pie crust a few minutes before baking solidifies the oils so they brown in place instead of dissolving into the flour. This is useful information, not just about internal combustion engines and flaky pies but about how things work for a reason and how she can tap into that to solve problems and create value.

¹⁴ *The Boy Who Believed In Magic* examines the effects of this kind of magic in the form of a storybook. And the study guide is free! Get them both at thetinycompanycalledme.com

When a girl figures out how things work, she's less likely to believe other people possess magic powers that are unattainable to her. That makes her more likely to explore farther, learn more and grow wise.

Let's get practical. There was in chapter two a list of life skills every entry-level adult needs. I think every one of these skills can be learned far more effectively by exploring than it can be taught by explaining. Here are 18 examples.

The Explainer Says

- **Timeliness** It will take you 20 minutes to get from here to there.
- **Decision-Making** Here are your choices. I'll tell you what *I* would choose.
- **Responsibility** You *knew* that was your responsibility!
- **Cleanliness** Go take a bath. You stink.

The Explorer Says

- What time do you think you'll need need to leave to be on time?
- How do you see the options? How do you think your choice will affect your priorities?
- How did you understand our agreement?
- What have you done since your last bath? Because, no offense, but you don't exactly smell fresh.

The Explainer Says

- **Godliness**

You know every time you talk back to me you make Baby Jesus cry.

I have some bad news for you, honey: If you mess up, you're going to Hell.

- **Negotiation**

You can't always have your way.

- **Listening**

You need to learn to listen.

The Explorer Says

I want to talk with you about this Bible verse: It says, "Children, do what your parents tell you." What do you think that means?

I have some good news for you: "God didn't go to all the Trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again."¹⁵

Do you think it would be fair if we always did only what I want to do? Let's talk about what that means when we have to *choose* between two things because we can't do both.

Do you think it's better or worse when I listen to you? Let's talk about how that works when you listen to me too.

¹⁵ The Gospel of John, chapter three, verse 17, The Message Bible

- **Empathy**

The Explainer Says

You tell Tommy you're sorry right now.

Cut out that racket! It's not that big a deal.

You stop that crying. People are looking at you.

The Explorer Says

Did you hurt Tommy? How do you know? Would you like it if he did that to you?

I'm glad you're excited but I want you to use an indoor voice.

It's OK that you're upset but you have to cry softly.

- **Basic Logic + Discernment**

OK, this one doesn't lend itself to a simple comparison. Learning the basics of logic and discernment involves learning to ask good questions about *everything*. Here are the three best questions I know—and they fit just about anywhere:

What? What happened here? What do you want? What's the big deal?

So What? So what do you think that means? What difference would that make?

Now What? Now what do you need to do? Now what do you know that you didn't know before? Now what does that change?

- **Basic Navigation**

I'll draw you a map—aw heck, why don't I just lead you there?

Get on the computer and go to www.Mapquest.com.

The Explainer Says

The Explorer Says

- **Basic Nutrition + Food Preparation**

Here's an ongoing dialogue and workshop series between you and your child that, at the very least, could save him from gaining the Freshman 20 when he leaves your home. Ask your child questions about nutritional values or clean food-preparation surfaces and withhold food until he brings back an answer. Just kidding. But seriously, withhold food from time to time so he'll learn to appreciate you. Just kidding. But seriously, start the training early enough in life and your child could provide welcome companionship and help in the kitchen.

- **Basic Household Skills**

Everyone needs to know how to clean a bathroom and do his own laundry without shrinking the cotton and wool and turning all the whites pink. Everyone needs to know from experience what it takes to iron a shirt without scorching it (and to be informed by that knowledge before purchasing high-maintenance clothing). I recommend starting early training on small tasks and working up to things that plug up or plug in.

- **Basic Phone Skills**

How can I call him back if you didn't get his number?

Let's make a list of information you need to give or get when you talk on the phone.

- **Basic Computer Skills**

This is on the list only to acknowledge that anyone growing up on the grid will need basic computer skills. This doesn't mean you have to buy a computer for everyone in your family. It just means the jobs that pay a living wage in your child's future assume a foundational level of computer competence. Act accordingly.

- **Basic Physical Fitness + Health Care**

The Explainer Says

You're a fat, pasty slob. Turn off that computer and go get some exercise.

The Explorer Says

Come walk with me. Seriously; it will do us both some good. Walk with me; we'll leave in five minutes and be back in a half hour.

- **Elementary Personal Finance**

To teach your child to balance a checkbook, give her a checkbook (not a bank account, necessarily) and show her how it works. Teach her to budget money by helping her develop a budget worksheet that corresponds to her access to money. Teach her what money costs by tying her discretionary allowance to performing tasks that benefit your family (which is to say, don't give her spending money just for being alive; give her spending money for creating value so she sees the connection between work and income).

- **Practical Language Skills**

This could mean any number of things. Here's what I mean: Words have meaning to the one who speaks them and the one who hears them. After the words are spoken it is the responsibility of the speaker and the hearer to talk back and forth until they both know they mean the same thing—even if it's a disagreeable thing. People learn this only by doing it and there is no better place to learn it than home.

- **Emotional Vocabulary**

If I ever hear that word come out of your mouth I'll scrape your tongue with a steel brush. And wipe that look off your face!

So, is what you're feeling more *angry* or *frustrated*? OK; is it more *frustrated* or *boxed in*? More *boxed in* or *trapped*? More *trapped* or *hopeless*? More *hopeless* or *worn out*?

So there's the homework: 18 skills to help your child learn through exploring instead of explaining.¹⁶ That's just one skill a year if you're pregnant now. If your child already has one foot out the door, pick a couple of skills you think are important to work on and see how much ground you can cover without driving each other crazy.

There's a bonus:

Exploring with the young rather than *explaining* things for them turns *teachers* into *learners*. Asking good questions and listening carefully reveals what a child knows and what he doesn't know. Exploration exposes blank spots and mistakes and shows us where to focus attention. Which leads to this unconditional guarantee: When the instructor becomes a student of the student, everyone learns.

¹⁶ There are more tips on understanding and teaching these skills in *Raising Adults*: thetinycompanycalledme.com