

# A Father-Son Connection:

## Expressing Strong Needs Non-defensively and Listening with Empathy

For a long time I have been interested in getting better results in my relationships, and finding Nonviolent Communication was a gift. For example, when communicating with my son, after unhappy conversations in which I expressed judgmental, shaming attitudes, I vowed to myself, “Don’t be disapproving”; “Control the anger”. But what could I do to be more positive? What could I do with my anger?

Sometimes the best thing I could think to do was to stay quiet. I would let his mom deal with the matter, because I was afraid that I would just get angry and this would make matters worse. I lacked specific things to say or do to stay positive.

The following is a hypothetical example of a dad motivated with concern for his son, but speaking to his teenage son in the language of blame and guilt, followed by how the conversation might go using Nonviolent Communication.

Dad: (feeling fear for his son’s safety) “You were drinking again last night. If you and your friends keep on drinking and driving you’re going to hurt yourself or hurt someone else. You need to be more responsible.”

Instead of making himself vulnerable by expressing his fear and his need for his son’s safety, Dad has condemned the behavior as irresponsible. Negative judgements usually invoke some external standard as to what is right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, This is an indirect and impersonal way to say, “I don’t like it when you do that”. Dad has also made a negative prediction about the future, “...If you keep that up, you’re going to ...”, a dangerous step towards building a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Son: “I’m not hurting anybody”. Instead of examining his own behavior to consider consequences, the son defends himself. It would be too painful to see himself as his Dad sees him right now: an irresponsible screw-up.

Dad: “I don’t think Josh or Jaime would be drinking and driving.” Here Dad makes a comparison, another form of judgment.

Son: “Dad, you are clueless.”

Dad: “Mom is worried sick about your behavior” Here Dad implies that the son is responsible for causing Mom’s feelings. This is classic motivation through guilt.

Dad: “Now I’m sorry I gave you that money for your birthday. Is that right to spend it on alcohol?” Again, he invokes an external standard of judgment (the behavior is not right). Perhaps even more painfully, he negates a previous action in which he was generous. His generosity was a mistake. The son doesn’t deserve generosity. The son is likely to hear a message that he is unworthy and defective.

Dad: “I have to ground you for a month.” Dad thinks he *has to* punish his son. He doesn’t like to inflict punishment on his son. But his concept of *duty as a father* overwhelms that. If we are to act non-violently we embrace our free responsibility in each moment. No duty, policy, rules and regulations, supervisor, commanding officer, etc can deny our free responsibility to bring our action in harmony with what we know our feelings and needs to be. The tragedy is that we are socialized to lose contact with our authentic voice. Our feelings and needs remain buried beneath an impersonal voice that we have adopted.

Now let’s re-do the father-son conversation using the language of the heart.

**Observation:** Stating what event triggered a response, without mixing in a judgment. Dad:

“When you came home I smelled alcohol on your breath” is an observation. “When you came home drunk” would be a judgment.

**Feeling** Sticking with actual feelings rather than thoughts that analyze and judge. “I felt worried” rather than “I felt disrespected” (judgment: you didn’t respect me)

**Needs** Stating the human need that is beneath the feeling. “...because I’m really want to know you are safe...I’m needing to know how I can help you stay safe”

**Request** for something that is possible for the him to do. “I’m wondering if you would be willing to tell me what was going on tonight that led you to choose to drink”

Those are the four steps in *expressing* oneself non-violently. The other half is the *listening*. The listener tries to listen for the **feelings** and **needs** that the speaker may have trouble expressing without defensiveness. Through the next part of the dialogue the only guideline to follow is Guess at the feelings and needs behind the words:

Son: “It’s my business what I was doing tonight”.

Dad: “So you don’t feel comfortable talking about it?”

Son: “No. It’s my business”

The dad realizes that his son cannot fulfill his request to tell about the reasons for his drinking on account of feelings blocking the way. The dad tunes into those feelings, listening for the needs behind them. In the process, the son becomes more aware of his need. Notice in what follows that the dad **guesses** at the son’s feelings and needs, rather than asking “What are you needing?” The guess is a more connecting approach.

Dad: “I’m guessing that past experience has led you to mistrust talking to me about these kinds of things” In order to be able talk about this without feeling defensive, this dad has done some self-empathy work. [See article on Self-Empathy]

Son: “You’re right about that!

Dad: “You might have been wanting some understanding and you didn’t get it?”

Son: “I don’t think it’s possible to get understanding from you”

The dad really needs some self-empathy now. Fortunately, he has practiced this encounter and sees the son’s pain behind his sharp comments.

Dad: “I imagine that was pretty frustrating, to share something about your life and not get the kind of response you wanted. I wonder if you lost hope that it could ever happen?”

Son: “Pretty hopeless, all right.”

Dad: Right now I’m sensing the sadness it might feel to lose that hope of connecting with me.

Son, eyes averted: “I’m over it.”

The son averted his eyes to avoid displaying the sadness that was in them, thinking about missing his dad’s acceptance. The son’s comment, “I’m over it” doesn’t deny that he needs connection to his dad, but simply indicates that he no longer expects it or tries for it. The facade of indifference protects a deep vulnerability. For a young male in this culture it is considered shameful to have such a need. At this point Dad chooses to shift to expressing his own observations, feelings, needs, request)

Dad: “Hearing how you would have liked for a connection with me and ended up feeling hopeless---I feel sad. I really wanted to connect with you too. I didn’t know a good way to do it.” Not wanting to say more words at one time than his son can absorb, the dad invites his son to respond, “Can you see I’m sad about not having a good way to connect with you?”

Son: "Yes".

Dad: "When I think about how I've gotten angry, I'm sad for missing that trust between us. And now I'm afraid. Because if I can't connect with you, I'll not be able to talk with you about the alcohol and stuff you're facing out there..." (once again, stopping before too many words) "...I'm hoping you can hear that behind my anger and advice was a concern for you."

Son: "Yeah, I know. But I don't need your concern, because I know how to handle myself".

Father and son have already traveled towards a closer connection. The son has uncovered the wound of not meeting his need to connect to his father---perhaps surprising himself that it was still unhealed. His father's expression of remorse has softened the son's heart. Both father and son experience the bittersweet taste of what it is like to talk openly, unlike the missed opportunities of the past. They have begun to build the quality of connection in which each can see the other's perspective. With this quality of connection, discussions about the son's activities can proceed without the defensiveness.

The dad tries to understand the need behind the statement, "I know how to handle myself." Dad: "I'm hearing that you are concerned about your own safety, and that you take steps to be safe"

Son: "Yeah, Dad. I'm not riding in cars with people who have been drinking".

Dad: "I feel relieved to hear that".

Since the son is experiencing empathy from his father, he voluntarily opens up and gives information that helps the dad relax. The dad has acknowledged the son's need for his own safety. The son can then explore his own problem-solving ideas, with the dad there as a "sounding board" to help clarify the son's strategies. The dad will also express his concerns, mindful that his son has a strong need for autonomy--the capacity to solve his own problems on his own. The last thing the son wants to experience is "being treated like a child". Mindful of this, the dad will

express his concerns in a way that communicates respect.

Dad: "Back when I was your age I found it hard to avoid getting into cars where the driver had been drinking. It seemed too difficult to find alternative ways to get home."

Son: "Dad, when we know someone is going to drive home, he doesn't drink."

The dad is skeptical that his son's crowd is as careful as his son reports. He finds himself ready to say, "I don't trust that plan". With some self-empathy, he realizes that he is still fearful and that more non-defensive communication with his son is the best way to meet his need for his son's safety. So he reminds himself to keep going with empathetic communication rather than say something that will block the connection.

Dad: "I'm glad your generation is using a designated driver. That's a lot safer than what went on in my day. Still, I'm nervous that there might be some situations in which there won't be that alternative. Would you feel comfortable calling me for a ride if you need to? I don't care what hour or where, I'll come and get you---and no attitude from me."

The request is a "present" request, that is, it requests something that can be fulfilled in the present moment--for the son to say how he feels about the commitment to future behavior (to call for a ride home). A present request is more useful than just soliciting a promise for the future, since the son's attitude right now in making an agreement is crucial to how well that agreement will hold up. Hesitation may indicate:

- a lack of trust that the dad would really refrain from disapproval,
- a perceived loss of autonomy at "having to call home"
- a risk of shaming attitudes from the peer group, etc.

If there is hesitation, the dad wants to keep the dialogue going, empathizing with the son until each obstacle is considered out loud.. The son has

the benefit of thinking ahead to various scenarios in which he may find it challenging to stay safe. The dad becomes more informed about his son's world and may hear things that put his mind at ease in some respects or raise concerns in others. So his involvement in his son's life can be better suited to address the son's needs.

### **Summary:**

The aim of Nonviolent Communication is to achieve the quality of connection with our children in which both of us are most likely to get our needs met. The language which disconnects us from our children often involves invoking standards of right and wrong, suggesting that the child is undeserving unless he or she meets certain standards. Other disconnects include comparing our child with others, and holding them responsible for how they "make us" feel. We diminish our influence with our children when we believe we have to invoke "consequences" for their behavior, that they "learn" when we inflict suffering on them.

The quality connection is achieved when we listen with empathy to our children, listening especially for the needs beneath their anger, their fear, etc. When we communicate our desire to understand, we encourage deeper dialogue. When we express our own strongly held desires and concerns, we need to do so by making transparent our needs and feelings. And we need to make requests for specific things the child can do in the present.