

The Heart of Parenting: Nonviolent Communication in Action

by Marion Badenoch Rose PhD

Nonviolent Communication allows us to shift our thinking from good and bad judgments to heartfelt connection with ourselves and our children through focusing on the universal human needs we are both seeking to meet.

“She drives me mad when she won’t tidy her room.” Frustration and anger are common when our kids either do things we don’t like, or fail to behave in ways we want them to.

Often we respond with judgments, “She’s so stubborn,” or, “I’m such a failure as a parent.” We deal with our feelings by using labels, blame, criticism, and diagnosis. But the problem is that judging our children and believing what they “should” be doing lead us to feel angry. Judging ourselves instead, then guilt, shame and depression result. Feeling hopeless about our children’s desire to cooperate, we try to motivate and coerce them with punishments or rewards. Thinking and communicating this way is part of the Domination model. Families, schools, workplaces, relationships, and politics run on this system. Hierarchical power relationships and unequal privileges abound. People (particularly children) are viewed as inherently selfish.

Defending, Resisting, and The Need for Autonomy

Whenever we try to make our children behave in a certain way through demanding or coercing, we evoke resistance because humans have a universal need for autonomy. Their resistance comes as submission (leading to resentment and deadening) and rebellion (leading to anger).

Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of Nonviolent Communication, says of his kids, “And here were these young children teaching me this humbling lesson, that I couldn’t make them do anything. All I could do is make them wish they had .. [and] anytime I would make them wish they had, they would make me wish I hadn’t made them wish they had. Violence begets violence.”¹

Wanting to avoid conflict, many parents take the permissive approach. They aim to meet all their child’s needs and ignore their own. This leads to resentment in the parent, models self-sacrifice to the child, and prevents the child’s needs for contribution and cooperation being met.

A New Definition of Violence

Marshall Rosenberg grew up in a turbulent Detroit neighbourhood and has initiated peace programmes in areas such as Rwanda, the Middle East and Northern Ireland. He describes some everyday violent behaviours:

1. Reward and punishment, “Punishment is the root of violence on our planet.”²
2. Guilt, where we trick others into thinking that they are responsible for our feelings, eg. “Now you’re really making me angry.”
3. Shame, where we label someone when they don’t do what we want, eg. “You are so rude.”
4. Denying responsibility for our actions - using, “had to,” “can’t,” “should,” “must,” and “ought.” Rosenberg describes how this kind of language was used by many Nazi war criminals.

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Talking with our kids in these violent ways spirals into disconnection and conflict. In the long term, it affects a child's self-esteem, relationships, and communication, as well as their intrinsic desires for contribution, cooperation, trust, and connection. These violent communications are called "jackal" in Nonviolent Communication, since jackals live in hierarchical packs. However, judgments and violence are tragic distortions of unmet needs, so behind all jackal talk is a giraffe waiting to be heard.

The Giraffe Heart

Nonviolent communication is also called giraffe language, because giraffes have the largest heart of any land mammal, they stick their necks out, and their saliva digests thorns! Shifting from jackal to giraffe requires changing the way we think and communicate. Intention and language are both involved. Using giraffe, we intend to connect compassionately with ourselves and others, and inspire compassion from them. Aiming to create a quality of interaction where everyone gets their needs met, our goal is to make life more wonderful for all. We move from power over to sharing power. Rejecting the domination language of blame, judgment and coercion, we embrace life-serving needs of compassion, cooperation and contribution. "The most powerful and joyful intrinsic motivation human beings have for taking any action is the desire to meet our own and other's needs." 4

Permissive parenting this is not, since communicating our unconditional love and respect doesn't mean we have to be permissive, give up our values, or even like what our children are doing in any particular moment.

We aim to get what we want, but not at our children's expense. "Our needs are met most fully and consistently when we find strategies that also meet others' needs." 5 When a child is not criticised or coerced, they do not need to defend themselves, can open their heart to their feelings and needs and empathise with others, leading to a wish to cooperate. "Rewards and punishments are not necessary when people see how their efforts are contributing to their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the other." 6

A Spiritual Practice

Using Nonviolent Communication, our thinking, hearing and speaking can depart from our cultural and habitual conditioning. The intention and tools enable us to reveal what's in our heart and to empathically receive what is in our child's heart. As with any practice, consciousness and effort are required. At first using the model may seem confusing and unnatural, but remember Gandhi's words, "Don't mix up that which is habitual with that which is natural."

Compassionate Communication is a process language that focuses our here and now awareness on feelings and needs, and actions to meet those needs. The model is a practical way to put the intentions into practice. Three options for connecting are: self-empathy; self-expression; and giving empathy.

The model consists of four steps: Observations, Feelings, Needs and Requests. Attention on the needs aspect is at the heart of this practice, from which the other steps arise.

Observations differ from evaluations

Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher, once remarked that observing without evaluating is the highest form of human intelligence. Unlike evaluation, judgment, criticism, and analysis, observation states a factual stimulus, (not cause), of our reaction. Instead of, “you never tidy up after yourself, this room is a pigsty,” an observation is, “I have not seen you tidy up your room in the past week. When I see your clothes lying on the floor in a pile

Feelings differ from thoughts

Judgments, thoughts and analyses often masquerade as feelings. Jackal disguised as giraffe says, “I feel abandoned, abused, attacked, let down, manipulated, rejected, unappreciated, unheard, and unsupported.” These are not feelings but thoughts about what we think the other person is doing to us. However, these faux feelings do give us clues about what needs are not being met. For example, if we think we are feeling “betrayed,” perhaps we are needing trust. Jackal dressed in giraffe clothing confuses thoughts for feelings in other ways, such as “I feel you are irresponsible,” and, “I feel that its time for you to stop that.”

In comparison, we can tell someone how we feel or guess how they feel using a pure language of feeling. These feelings include: concerned, disappointed, dismayed, exhausted, frustrated, overwhelmed, reluctant, shocked, uncomfortable, amazed, appreciative, excited, grateful, inspired, joyful, moved, proud, relaxed, tender, and warm.

Needs differ from strategies

Needs are the most important ingredient of Nonviolent Communication. Our needs, whether met or unmet, are the roots of our feelings. Relating our feelings to our needs, we say, “I feel frustrated because I am needing respect,” instead of, “you make me frustrated when you talk back at me.” The latter entices our children into believing they are the guilty cause of our feelings. “When we’re not able to say clearly what we need and only know how to make analyses of others that sound like criticism, wars are never far away, whether they are verbal, psychological, or physical wars.” 7

When we own that our feelings stem from our needs we model self-responsibility and establish clear boundaries.

Needs are universally shared, and include, acceptance, autonomy, celebration, consideration, connection, cooperation, community, empathy, harmony, inclusion, intimacy, love, order, peace, play, reassurance, safety, support, and understanding.

When we identify needs, understanding and connection results. Since all violent communications and actions are simply the tragic expression of unmet needs, we can easily translate any judgments and diagnoses of ourselves and others into needs that want meeting. Freeing ourselves from judgments we are able to connect compassionately within and without.

When our child says or does something we don’t like, we have four options:

Blame ourselves, “I’m a bad parent, its my fault she’s like this,”

Blame them, “You are so selfish,”

Connect to our feelings and needs, “I feel disappointed, because I need recognition for the effort I’ve made,”

Guess their feelings and needs, “Are you feeling reluctant because you are wanting to make your own choices?”

When we connect to our true feelings and needs, our children’s need for connection gets met, and they are more likely to want to cooperate to making life more wonderful for us. When we

understand and celebrate their feelings and needs, we can joyfully find ways to meet their needs and ours.

This happens even with very young children. Aiming to understand my two-year-old's feelings and needs, I am more able to avoid frustration and find a way to meet both of our needs. When I state my feelings and needs she seems to connect with me more and our interactions become more harmonious. Of course, we may choose to change our "need" words for small children, such as "Do you want to be able to do it?" rather than, "do you have a need for competence?"

Effective expression of needs happens when they are universal rather than specific and personal. "I need respect," is much easier to hear than, "I need you to be polite to me." When we surrender our usual strategies, our children are more likely to respond and we are more likely to find a mutually agreeable solution.

Requests differ from demands

We aim that our children only do something if they would enjoy contributing to make our life more wonderful and if doing it meets other needs of theirs. Aim for the quality Rosenberg suggests; "Hey, I'd really like you to do this, it would meet my need, but if your needs are in conflict I'd like to hear that, and let's figure out a way to get everybody's needs met." 8 Particularly important is expressing our requests in a way which will not be heard as demanding. Children will hear demands if they think that they will be blamed or punished if they don't do it, and will resist. You will probably pay for it later.

We can easily tell if we are requesting or demanding by our response when our children say, "no," in words or actions. If we empathise with the need they are meeting when they say, "no," then it is a request.

Requests are important, because if we express our feelings to our kids without explicitly asking for the response that we want, they may think we are trying to make them responsible for our feelings.

The format of requests

There are two kinds of requests - to meet a need not being met, or to determine if the required connection is there before meeting the need.

To ask our children to help meet a need of ours, we use positive language that is concrete, specific, action based, and presently doable. Rather than vague like, "Please be cooperative," or negative such as "Don't do that again," we aim for something like, "Would you be willing to do the washing up now?"

If we want to check out the connection, such as if we are not sure that they have received our message as we would like, "Would you be willing to tell me what you just heard me say so I can see if I have made myself clear?" If they don't get it as we meant, rather than telling them they're wrong, we might say, "I appreciate you telling me what you heard. I'd like you to hear it differently though ..(repeat it).. Would you be willing to tell me what you heard?"

Or, we may want to hear what they are feeling or thinking, "Would you be willing to tell me how you are feeling right now after hearing what I've just said?"

Putting It All Together

Expressing how I am without blaming or criticising

When I observe /see/hear/ imagine/ remember (not judge) ...

I feel (not think).....

Because I need/value (not a strategy)

Would you be willing to (not demanding) ...?

Empathically receiving without hearing blame or criticism

When you observe /see/ hear/ imagine/ remember

Do you feel

Because you need/value

Would you like

Giraffe Ears - Giving Empathy To Our Children

Having giraffe ears turned outwards means we give empathy to our child's feelings and needs. We aim to be present and understand rather than "get it right." This is very different from when we explain, reassure, educate, sympathise, advise, interpret, disagree, judge, and apologise.

In NVC, instead of asking, "How are you feeling, what are you needing?" we guess, "Are you feeling sad because you are needing closeness?" and they will tell us if that's not how it is for them! Guessing promotes being present rather than directing.

When Johnny said to his dad Simon, "I just can't do this homework," Simon wanted to reassure him, "Never mind, I'm sure you'll manage with some extra help." Responding like that does not meet a child's needs for understanding and empathy. Instead, Simon could have responded, "Are you feeling frustrated because you'd really like to understand it?" (Observations and requests are sometimes dropped when giving empathy).

Empathy means listening for the feelings and needs of our children even when we don't like what they are doing, and when they are using demands, judgments, silence, or saying, "no." For example, when Billy says to his mother, "You're so unfair," she can choose to respond, "Are you feeling frustrated because you are needing fairness?" "Yes, you let Rod watch TV after nine but you won't let me," "So are you upset because you'd like equality?" He is likely to respond again ... and she aims to keep responding until his needs for empathy get met. When that happens, she will sense a shift in him. In a conflict situation, we may move between offering empathy to our child, giving self empathy, and expressing our observations, feelings, needs and requests.

We can give our children empathy when they have strong feelings or when they seem to need understanding. When they are confident that their needs matter to us, they are more likely to hear our needs and requests and want to contribute. Until feelings and needs have been heard, strategies are not likely to last.

Self-empathy - the vital key

Guilt is a stone around many parents necks. When we do something for ourselves, we often "feel guilty" that it may be harming our children. However, guilt is an internal judgment, as violent as any judgment of our children. "When we are internally violent towards ourselves, it is difficult to be genuinely compassionate towards others," says Rosenberg. 9

Many of our actions toward our children stem not only from guilt, but also shame, obligation, duty, and should-thinking. This gives whatever we do a certain quality, quite different from when we do things motivated by a joy for contributing. It is also less likely to be appreciated.

And when we make internal demands, like “I should be more understanding of my children,” our need for autonomy will prompt us to resist.

Using Nonviolent Communication liberates us from the lifelessness of self-judgment. When we act in ways that we are unhappy about, we can simply connect to our feelings and needs. We move away from shame, guilt and depression, and find creative ways to help fulfill our needs.

Self-empathy is a vital tool for day-to-day parenting, as we turn our giraffe ears inwards to connect with what is alive in us, making empathy for our kids possible. Sometimes we may need Emergency First Aid Self-Empathy, when we stop, consciously breathe, and connect to our feelings and needs. We may even need to temporarily remove ourselves and seek empathy from another adult. If we feel depleted because our needs have not been met, we often cannot give empathy to our children. Meeting our own needs helps the whole family.

The Value of Appreciation

“Good girl,” or “You are so clever,” leaves a child dependent upon outward motivation as much as punishments and criticism do. It also creates a power imbalance where the parent acts as judge or evaluator. Instead of praise, we can choose to express our observations, feelings and the needs which have been met. So rather than, “Good boy, you are really so helpful,” we could say, “When I see that you have tidied up your room, I feel happy, because I really value order and cooperation.” Children then have the pleasure of acting on the basis of their intrinsic needs including contributing to others.

Freeing Ourselves From Anger

Parents commonly struggle with anger. With NVC we can translate anger into feelings and needs. When we are angry with our kids, we are doing two things: thinking that they caused our feelings; and thinking “they should have” Instead, we can choose to stop and breathe, identify our judgmental thoughts, and become aware of our unmet needs. We can then choose between expressing our observations, feelings and needs or offering empathy. Practising anger translation transforms violent communication into compassionate connection.

The Protective Use of Force

Differentiating protective force from punitive force is central to Nonviolent Communication. We use protective force when we need safety and there is not enough time for dialogue, such as when a child is running out into the road. Our intention is to protect rather than punish.

Making Life More Wonderful

When parents practice NVC they can contribute to a more wonderful life for their families.

Children learn that their feelings and needs matter. They have intimacy with their parents whilst having clear boundaries, knowing that they do not cause their parents’ feelings. Self-acceptance comes from living without judgment and blame. They experience doing things from their own internal motivation rather than from external punishments and rewards, and are thus more satisfied. They learn how to hear judgments, attacks, or anger with giraffe ears, and so create their own emotional safety. They learn to express their feelings in a way that is likely to be met by empathy and cooperation. They experience the satisfaction of contributing to their own wellbeing and that of their parents, friends and others.

Parents have the pleasure of contributing to a family where everyone's needs matter rather than using either authoritarian or permissive parenting styles. After acting in ways that don't meet their values, they can give self-empathy and find a way to meet these needs next time rather than attacking themselves with guilt and shame. Simply aiming to understand their child's feelings and needs behind any behaviour contributes to connection. Concrete tools help prevent parents from reacting with anger, punishment, judgment and blame and make understanding and the desire to contribute more likely.

Mutual trust and respect becomes the core of the relationship as each member of the family experiences the joy of willingly contributing to making other's lives more wonderful.

Finding out more

Check out the website of the Centre for Nonviolent Communication at www.cnvc.org and nonviolentcommunication.com and nvcaustralia.com where you can find out about learning and training in NVC, web support groups, purchasing books, videos, audiotapes, etc.

Notes

1. Marshall Rosenberg, (2003) Raising Children Compassionately booklet, PuddleDancer Press, p4-5.
2. Marshall Rosenberg, (2003) Teaching Children Compassionately booklet, PuddleDancer Press, p13.
3. Marshall Rosenberg, (2003) Teaching Children Compassionately booklet, PuddleDancer Press.
4. Inbal Kashtan, Parenting From the Heart booklet, PuddleDancer Press, p3.
5. Inbal Kashtan, (2002) Compassionate Connection: Attachment Parenting and Nonviolent Communication article.
6. Marshall Rosenberg, (2003) Life-Serving Education booklet, PuddleDancer Press, p9.
- 7 Marshall Rosenberg, (2003) We Can Work It Out, Resolving Conflicts Peacefully and Powerfully booklet, PuddleDancer Press, p6.
8. Marshall Rosenberg, Raising Children Compassionately booklet, PuddleDancer Press, p11.
9. Marshall Rosenberg, (2003) Nonviolent Communication A Language of Life, 2nd edn., PuddleDancer Press, p129.

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