

Giraffe Talk: Nonviolent Communication for Parents

by Lyssa Clayton and Eva Schonveld

How can I communicate with my children?

One of the biggest issues for me as a parent is how I communicate, or not, with my children. With the best of intentions I have found myself saying things in ways which seem to actually make things worse and sometimes find it near impossible not to head down the slope of blaming, judging and criticizing.

How many of us end up saying, “You always _____,” “Why can’t you just do/don’t do x, y, z” in a tone of voice which has even more unpleasant ‘you’re bad’ connotations. Or find we’ve forced our child do something we wanted them to, but felt really unhappy about how we’ve achieved the desired result.

For many of us, much of how we relate to our children is, at it’s root, based on coercion: the “you will get/not get something if you don’t cooperate.” The sub-text in a lot of our everyday wrangles with our children is “I’m bigger and stronger than you, so you’re going to have to do what I say” (i.e. ‘might is right’). We teach our children values more deeply through how we interact with them than what we preach at them.

So, are there ways to go about changing the way we communicate at a deep level? Are there tools available to help? Is there help and support to do this—to even begin it?

Faced daily with a sense of exasperation and feeling of powerlessness in my home, I was intrigued and excited to hear about the idea of Nonviolent or Compassionate Communication™. The word ‘violent’ in this context refers to the way we can hurt or damage people through the use of words which do not respect another as worthy of our compassion and understanding, rather than necessarily actually coming to blows.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

The process of NVC was developed by Marshall B Rosenberg, Ph.D. as a response to his experience of growing up in Detroit in a culture colored with violence and race riots. He found himself exploring two major questions:

1. What happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature, leading us to behave in a violently and exploitatively way¹
2. What allows some people to remain connected to compassionate nature in the most under even the most trying circumstances?¹

¹ Source of quotations: *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* by Marshall B Rosenberg, Ph.D., 2003, ISBN 1-892005-04-2 Reprinted by PuddleDancer Press with permission from Lyssa Clayton and Eva Schonveld.



Rosenberg was struck by the crucial role of words and language, and has identified and developed a process of compassionate communication which can enable us to make and keep a heartfelt connection with another person—whether they're using the same process or not.

"Instead of being habitual, automatic reactions," says Rosenberg, "our words become conscious responses based firmly on awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling or wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others a respectful and empathic attention. In any exchange, we come to hear our own deeper needs and those of others."¹

The NVC Process

The central aim of the NVC process is to stay in conscious relationship with another person. The fundamental process (called 'classical NVC' - the idea that once you've mastered the essentials, it will be easier to use it more freely and colloquially) has four stages: observation, feelings, needs, and request.

You may not need to use every stage in each communication, but again, for clarity when you're learning it's good to be aware of them all. At each stage you can be in one of three 'modes':

- 1) Checking out with yourself internally what your observation, feeling, need or request might be
- 2) Expressing to another what your observation, feeling, need or request might be, or
- 3) Receiving from another person what their observation, feeling, need or request might be

NVC is also helpful in expanding the vocabulary we use to describe what we're feeling, or needing. Feelings: i.e. happy, ecstatic, overjoyed, sad, despairing, miserable concerned, apprehensive, worried; Core needs: i.e. quiet, sleep, food, autonomy, support, harmony, clarity, understanding, appreciation, choice about our environment, contribution, play).

STEPS

1. Observation

What do you actually see, hear or remember—"the concrete action"—rather than your interpretation. Think about what a video camera would record—for example: a camera doesn't show 'teasing'; it shows one child taking a toy out of another's hand; it doesn't show 'laziness', it shows wet towels on the bathroom floor. For example, "When I see dishes on the living room floor;" "When I hear you say that to your sister;" "I see you took the truck out of Annie's hand."

2. Feelings

How you feel in relation to what you observe. "I feel ___ because ___;" rather than, "you make me feel ____." This stage means that you take responsibility for your own feelings (in the knowledge that the same behavior in a different situation might bring out a very different response in you). For example, "I feel cross and confused as I remember we had an agreement about clearing up after meals." "Are you frustrated seeing her using your tape player when you asked her not to?" "Are you feeling impatient because someone else is having a turn first?"

3. Needs

In NVC, the more fundamental the need we can express or pick up on, the deeper the communication can be—your need for 'that toy' might be somewhat fleeting, but your need to be included in playing is deep, and can be understood by anyone. Much of the skill in NVC is translating our own and other people's expressed feelings and needs into their deeper more core aspects. What is the need/value/desire I have, or



that you have and are trying to meet? For example, "It is important to me that our home is a comfortable place to be and that we share taking care of it together." "Would you like some understanding and respect of your need for privacy?" "Does that look like an interesting toy that you would love to play with?"

4. Request

Concrete, do-able, positive actions we request in order to enrich our lives. One NVC expression is: "I can't do a don't", so it's important that your requests are stated in the positive. Instead of, "Don't leave your toys all over the floor," how about "Let's put your toys in the boxes so we have a big clear space to start playing in the morning." For instance, "Would you be willing to discuss with me how we can work together in sharing these domestic jobs? Shall we do that now or arrange a time to do that later today?" "Would you be willing to discuss and decide between you about borrowing each others things?" "Maybe we could talk with Annie and agree how long it will be until it is your turn, would that help?"

That's a brief description of the NVC process. Of course we can use the same components to describe very positive interactions such as, "When I see the smile on your face I feel happy, I enjoy seeing you have fun with your friends." We can also use it without uttering a word, by the quality of attention and empathy we give to ourselves and others. The importance of empathic listening and receiving of another person, a child, a baby, seems more and more profound to me as the days and weeks go by. Aside from its aims and ideals, NVC is also cannily pragmatic.

Shouting, "This is how it's going to be whether you like it or not," may release some anger in that moment, but is it more likely to get you what you want—whether short term, with your child readily going along with your plans—or long term creating a happy, trusting family environment? Finding out what your child's deeper need and collaborating with them can result in finding a way for both of you to get what you need.

As parents, it is important to value how crucial it is to take time to listen to our own internal dialogue. If our fundamental needs are not met and nourished, how can we continue to give to and care for our children? When the last thing I feel capable of is listening empathically to my child, what do I need to be able to do that? Is it support? a few minutes privacy and quiet? to get the tea into the oven first so I can listen fully? If we don't value our own needs and desires others may not either, and our ability to care for our children is made all the harder.

There's a lot more to NVC, and though it's basically a very simple, straightforward process, it can take quite a while to learn to use it in stressful situations. If you're interested, there are books to read, and foundation courses being run in and around Edinburgh which really help to get the basics in place. There are also practice groups you can join, which can be supportive and helpful in the long-term work of shifting from habitual to compassionate communication.

You may contact **Lyssa Clayton** and **Eva Schonveld** at the Birth Resource Centre Edinburgh, where they provide prenatal and postnatal classes, groups, support and information for all women, partners and families.

Phone: 0-131-229-3667

Website: www.birthresourcecentre.freeserve.co.uk

For more information on Nonviolent Communication visit the PuddleDancer Press website at www.NonviolentCommunication.com
For more information about the Center for Nonviolent Communication please visit www.CNVC.org



About Nonviolent Communication

From the bedroom to the boardroom, from the classroom to the war zone, the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) process is changing lives every day. NVC provides an easy to grasp, effective method to get to the root of conflict, violence and pain peacefully. By examining the unmet needs behind what we do or say, the NVC process helps reduce hostility, heal pain, and strengthen professional or personal relationships.

The NVC process is now being taught in corporations, classrooms, prisons and mediation centers around the globe. And it is affecting cultural shifts as institutions, corporations and governments integrate NVC consciousness into their organizational structures and their approach to leadership.

International peacemaker, mediator, author and founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg spends more than **250** days each year teaching the NVC process, including some of the most impoverished, war-torn areas of the world. More than **180** certified trainers and hundreds more teach this life-enriching process in **35** countries to approximately **250,000** people each year.

About the Center for Nonviolent Communication

The Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) is an international nonprofit peacemaking organization whose vision is a world where everyone's needs are met peacefully. CNVC is devoted to supporting the spread of Nonviolent Communication training and consciousness around the world.

Access local, national and international training opportunities, download trainer certification information, connect to local NVC communities and purchase a variety of other NVC learning materials at:

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