

Teaching Boys Pragmatic Communication

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First, let's simplify terms. Essentially, *pragmatic communication means practical communication*, and includes the basic elements of social communication, such as introductions, “hellos” and “goodbyes,” and the normal “back and forth” pace of typical conversations. Something which you might perceive as relatively simple – like giving a compliment – can be incredibly difficult and awkward for some boys. You can hear a pin drop when I initially ask boys for compliment suggestions in my *Mighty Good Kids* groups. Yet giving a thoughtful compliment is one of the practical communication skills that can help pave the way to good relationships. Simply put, it's easier to make friends if you know how to make others feel good. While both boys and girls can have trouble with pragmatic communication, in my clinical office the majority of young clients with nonverbal communication problems are boys. Over time I've developed group techniques that are effective with boys because they build on the three primary social learning platforms of boys – the desire for *action*, *mastery*, and *play*.

Why Pragmatic Communication Skills Are So Important

Communication is a behavior. We all know that our behavior reflects who we are, but—and here's the important part—our behavior also influences who we are and who we become. Because communication is a behavior, our *communication* not only reflects who we are, but also who we become. When we help a boy's communication skills evolve, we develop the most essential building blocks of his psychological well-being.

Moving beyond using speech for merely functional requests (Can I have twenty bucks? You gonna eat all those fries?), boys can learn to use communication for self-definition: (I feel...I believe...I hope...I am....). Expressive communication paves the way for greater social and academic success in childhood, as well as greater personal and professional opportunities in adulthood. Boys who fail to understand the nuances of social interaction, and who aren't given the tools they need to define and express their feelings and wishes, are at a disadvantage in most aspects of contemporary life.

Pragmatic communication skills tend to fall into three main categories: Physical, Verbal, and Thinking. The table below comes from my book, *Boys of Few Words: Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect* (Guilford Press 2006), and provides some examples from each domain:

Pragmatic (Practical) Communication Skills	
PHYSICAL	Examples
Maintaining appropriate conversational distance	Other children may complain that "he's bothering me," or say "tell him to stop touching me" while playing together. Sometimes inserts himself physically into a group of children by pushing or nudging others out of the way in order to join the conversation.
Eye contact	Doesn't look others in the eye; hides behind hair/hat/sunglasses; stares to the point of discomfort.
Linking gestures with ideas and emotions	Body language doesn't match speech (thanks you for giving him a desired gift but slumps and stares off into space); waves too strongly or too unenthusiastically for the circumstances; forgets to reinforce emotion with body language.
Using facial expression effectively	Facial expressions don't convey interest in other people; expression is not congruent with topic or situation; doesn't nod to show he gets the point, looks furious at small disappointment; forgets to smile
VERBAL	
Attending to time and place	Talks too fast; doesn't know when to interject a comment or let others speak, doesn't know how much information to share (goes on and on about a subject to someone's obvious irritation).
Turn-taking	Consistently interrupts; doesn't perceive when it's someone else's turn to talk.
Voice modulation	Has trouble with prosody (pitch, tone, volume, inflection); speaks too softly or loudly without regard for physical proximity (you're across the room but he doesn't raise his voice to answer you).
Giving compliments	Doesn't know how to give a compliment relevant to a person and circumstances; sometimes unintentionally insults people ("you're a lot less fat than you were")
Greetings and Good-byes	Doesn't know how to introduce himself to individuals or groups; can't initiate social contact (avoids parties and gatherings); doesn't know how to close a conversation (just walks off when he's done talking); doesn't shake hands/share hugs with close friends or family members; forgets to say "hello"
THINKING	
Detecting emotions in other people	Doesn't consider other people's emotional state before speaking (you're in the middle of an argument with someone and he asks you to make him a snack); doesn't realize when it's time to "back off"; doesn't read signs about how you feel (thinks you're mad when you're not)
Perceiving and expressing humor	Takes jokes, sarcasm or irony literally; laughs at inappropriate times; doesn't engage in word play or friendly teasing with peers
Knowing how to make conversational transitions	Forgets to take his turn in conversations (calls you up on phone and then says nothing); discussions filled with uncomfortable "dead space"; doesn't pick up on "leads" to

	continue conversation (So, you like baseball? Who's your favorite team?)
Anticipating other people's reactions	Neglects to consider the impact of his words before speaking; can't easily imagine how his words or actions will be perceived by others (says he likes one present more than another at his birthday party without anticipating that someone's feelings will be hurt).
<i>**All these skills should be considered in an age-appropriate context. Many of these skills are developed in adolescence. Compare your son's abilities relative to his peers.</i>	

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

When counselors organize social skills groups, they usually spend much of their time practicing and rehearsing pragmatic communication skills. A generality such as, “remember to show others how you feel,” is less effective than a specific demonstration, such as, “when you cross your arms across your chest like this, you’re using your body to tell other people to back off.” Practicing body language, gestures, and facial expressions is a kind of practical code kids can learn to boost their social confidence. Boys need lots of opportunity to practice these skills in situations where they have support and immediate feedback, and this is exactly what an effectively structured social skills group provides.

Neuroscience increasingly emphasizes the value of getting kids physically involved in learning how to apply empathy in their interactions with others. Physically engaging empathy appears to activate special networks of brain cells (mirror neurons) that make important emotions more available to one’s personal awareness. As an example, many boys can learn a gesture that signifies kindness more quickly than they can learn the words for communicating the same idea. However, once a child learns the gesture, the words are often not far behind. In this way, the body is a remarkable scaffold to a more reflective, verbal empathy. (Of course, a competent facilitator is needed to teach these skills. A child with a sensory integration or autism-spectrum disorder may need special help developing the confidence and skill to express himself with appropriate body language.)

The Benefits of a Boys-Only Social Skills Group

Boys also do well when they can drop the mask of “invincible cool” they so often feel compelled to wear in public. That’s why boys-only groups are effective, particularly for middle-school or teenage boys. Even if you could equally match, according to “skill level,” members of a co-ed social skills group, it would be hard to get around the intense social pressures that impact boys and girls in our society. You can also lead the group in a way that feels

right to boys. In my *Mighty Good Kids* groups, we frame the mastery of social skills in terms of *Strength* and *Honor*. And while my tone sometimes sounds more like a football coach than a “therapist,” it is in this environment that I make space for boys to accept themselves and each other, form supportive friendships, and take risks without fear of embarrassment.

All Kinds of Leaders

At talks, female therapists and teachers often ask me this excellent question: “How do I successfully relate to the boys in my care? After all, I’m not a big guy with a loud voice. Don’t you have a special advantage?” While being a male therapist can make it easier to get some clients in the door, what happens in group depends on how the facilitator sets the tone. Frankly, I can’t imagine anyone else, male or female, taking my exact approach as a group leader, because one of the keys to success is to be your authentic self. So you need to translate these general principals in a way that feels right to you, and in ways that are consistent with “good classroom management.”

1. Set some very clear, basic guidelines from day one. Keep it simple. For example, in my younger kids group, we march from the waiting room to my office in a “mighty good line.”
2. Don’t be afraid to share your enthusiasm. Knowing that an adult cares and is excited about this information is infectious. (This applies to parenting, too.)
3. Make the group safe for everyone—establish clear ground rules for group interaction and remind group members often. (I ask boys to take the *Mighty Good Pledge* at the first group meeting – a positive statement about their personal potential and respect for others – and ask them to retake the pledge if they get off-track in later meetings.)
4. Establish routines. Not only does repetition assist in learning, a sense of “we do it this way, because we’re part of a team” develops enthusiasm and camaraderie.

Of course, there is far more to be learned than can be conveyed in a short article. Creative discussion about how to teach pragmatic communication in this way is a popular topic in the many presentations I do for schools and child advocacy organizations. At the center of these presentations is a program for applying what neuroscience is teaching us about the developing social brain. This includes some important breakthroughs in our

understanding of special needs children and what can help propel their cognitive development. I frequently discuss such topics in my free newsletter, *Family Matters*. New research findings, and innovations in the art and science of teaching, promise to offer further resources for developing effective supports for the children in our care.

Stay tuned—new developments will be posted on this website.

*If your school, community, or organization would like help putting together a *Mighty Good Kids* program, please let me know.