



10 Conversations You Need to Have with Your Children

Shmuley Boteach

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Why do I have to repeat everything? Why does every conversation end in an argument?

Communicating with our children. Conversing. Connecting. When did it become so difficult? And how do we begin to change it for the better?

This book was designed to help parents answer these important questions, and it is based on two fundamental ideas: The first is that there are no bad children, and no deliberately bad parents -- but that sometimes, despite the best of intentions on both sides, there can be bad *relationships* between parents and children. The second is that, as parents, we must do everything we can to save those relationships, to reach out and really communicate with our children, because it is only through talking to them that we can create an environment for inspiration and change.

In this compelling book, Shmuley Boteach, passionate social commentator and outspoken relationship guru, walks you through the critical conversations, including: *cherishing childhood; developing intellectual curiosity; knowing who you are and what you want to become; learning to forgive; realizing the importance of family and tradition; being fearless and courageous*. As a father of eight, Rabbi Shmuley speaks from a wealth of experience. He has written a book for parents of children of all ages, from toddlers, who are just beginning to become aware of the world around them, to adolescents, who must learn to navigate all sorts of tricky social and academic pressures.

10 Conversations will help you stay connected to your children so that they develop the kind of strong moral character that leads to rich, meaningful lives.

10 Conversations You Need to Have with Your Children Details

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From Reader Review 10 Conversations You Need to Have with Your Children for online ebook

H.L. Balcomb says

I thoroughly enjoyed the chapter entitled Honoring the Feminine. The parallel analysis between Rene Descartes and Benedict de Spinoza's philosophies and how they collectively relate to the teachings of the Kabbalah was insightful. Additionally, I really like this statement: "These two aspects of God - the linear [male] and the circular [female] are also said to represent the spiritual origins of men and women." Common sense, probably; however, it was a great reminder of life's duality (yin and yang attributes).

The chapter that I probably reference the most in my daily life is the chapter on love. The author's opening quote summarizes the chapter core content: "Love is the force in the universe that brings everything together; hate drives everything apart. Love is the gravity that unites us; hate the antigravity that rips us asunder." The whole chapter is built around that teaching.

Overall, this is a great read, and I found that many of the 'parenting lessons' transfer into other interpersonal situations e.g. work, coaching, teams etc. In the author's own words: "And always remember: Words that emanate from the heart penetrate the heart." Powerful food for insight for parents and nonparents alike.

Claire says

There are ideas in this book that make it really worthwhile. But there must be other books that discuss these same concepts in a more enjoyable way. One reviewer said this should be titled something like "100 lectures I gave my kids" and I agree. I almost feel sorry for these kids who are sermonized to regularly – there are ways to teach these things without so much lecturing - and overall I didn't enjoy reading those parts. I did appreciate the religious basis for much of what he says. And I mean religious (as opposed to dogmatic). He refers to cherished literature and age-old traditions that hold true wisdom for living today. Here's my summary of ideas I think I will carry forward:

- Don't ask kids "what do you want to be" ask them "who do you want to be" ? I love this. "Work on motivating your child to hear that inner voice, the voice of conscience, you will inspire him to become a better person. There is simply no greater motivator than to have a child develop a commitment to himself, to who he wants to be, rather than to his parents who are telling him what he should be. When misbehaving, a child should never be made to feel as if he has betrayed his parents or his teachers; it is much more effective if he feels he has betrayed himself." Pg 33
- Grades don't matter. What matters is whether a child is intellectually curious. This curiosity is what makes each day extraordinary. Curiosity for other people is what makes relationships grow.
- Bestow dignity. Boteach says that "your foremost mission in life is to confer dignity on all of God's creatures." Dignity being: making people feel special, that they truly matter. This is a new idea for me to think on, I've never thought about showing love in terms of dignity, but it is obvious to me now that those go hand in hand.
- Honoring the feminine. "If someone were to ask me to sum up the Jewish religion in a single sentence, I would say 'Judaism is the cultivation of the feminine.'" What an interesting idea! Cultivation of all of the tender, caregiving, connecting, life-giving aspects of a person. Certainly every person is a blend of feminine and masculine characteristics, and he says religion is about cultivating the more feminine (or I had rather say "yin") part of ourselves.
- Forgiveness. "One of the basic truths about forgiveness: When we forgive, we are doing it first and foremost for ourselves."

- Fear vs caution. "Fear is a hysterical response to an imagined threat; caution is a calculated response to a real danger." I love it. I am already teaching my children the difference. Fear and anxiety take away our power. Caution empowers and allows us to use our frontal lobes instead of our "reptile brain."
 - God and doing the right thing. "You must always have a real and honest relationship with God, and part of that relationship gives you the right to be angry when He allows bad things to happen. We may not know the answers, and we may never know the answers, but we have a right to object to God's actions because God himself expects it. After all, He commands us to stand up for life, and that applies even when He has taken that life." I love this idea. That we hold God accountable for the awful things He permits that go against what He has written on our hearts, and then WE DEMAND BETTER OF HIM, and WE FORGIVE HIM (see forgiveness, above) and move forward, with praise for the good. Rabbi Boteach spoke to me when he said that when we explain tragedies to children in a religious context "We're not going to suddenly say, 'This is God's plan. It's for the best. Those four kids [He let die in the fire] were special souls and God wanted them in heaven.' That's patronizing, and an insult to the child's intelligence. It's about as convincing as the Tooth Fairy." Amen. The solution he offers is imperfect to me, but at least another option of how to talk about tragedies. All this makes me want to re-read the Book of Job.
 - To quote from pg 191: This story of Rabbi Zusya of Anipoli, who began to cry as he lay on his deathbed. Many of his devoted students were gathered around him, and they asked him what had brought forth his tears. "I'm afraid of what I'll tell God when I see him," he answered. "You see, when God asks me, 'Zusya, why weren't you as great as Abraham?' I'll answer, 'Lord, you did not make me Abraham,' and when God asks "Then why weren't you as great as Moses,' I'll answer, 'Lord, you did not make me Moses.' But when He asks me, 'Zusya, why weren't you as great as Zusya could have been?' I will have nothing to answer."
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Sunnie says

This was an excellent book. I don't usually read self help books, but this one was short and to the point. I think every parent should read this especially if you want your children to become people of good character. Even though it is written by a jewish rabi, it is intended for parents of all religions. I liked it so much I need to get my own copy!

Skylar Burris says

Perhaps this book would have been better titled "109 Excerpts from Lectures I Gave to My Children, Other Relatives, and the Occasional Stranger. "

"10 Conversations" primarily involved Rabbi Boteach relating portions of a wide variety of moral and philosophical lectures (what he calls "conversations") he has delivered to his children over the years. These "conversations" did involve questions, but almost all of them were rhetorical. "Why X? Why Y? I'll tell you why X and Y." Now, this may be a standard and even useful method of teaching, but it's not really a "conversation." At one point one of his "conversations" involved him telling his children that they were to listen to him in silence for *twenty* minutes, and then they could speak. It's an interesting definition of "conversation." At one point he recounts getting upset with a business man he met with to discuss a project: "In the course of lunch, when we spoke, I could see he wasn't really listening to me. He was not interested in anything I had to say, and he kept interrupting to talk about himself. That's not listening." In the text, the word listening is emphasized in italics almost as if it were being whined. Rabbi Boteach apparently does not like to be interrupted when he is having "conversations."

As with his book “Kosher Sex,” he finds time to criticize Christianity, but not as much time. He only has one objection to make this time around. He feels like one of the main problems with Christianity is that in the Christian religion, one must “assume that God is always right,” whereas Judaism, he argues, recognizes that it’s “our job” to “make God listen to us.” Well, I suppose that suits him, since he does seem to enjoy making people listen to him. (I’m not entirely sure, in all he says in this section, that he really speaks accurately of either the Christian or Jewish viewpoints.)

I mean no disrespect, but I am not sure the author is aware how he may actually sound to readers when he says some of the things he says. He is obviously a good father and a moral man who has faced the challenge of raising eight children well, and he tells some excellent didactic tales and uses his children and himself for more than one fine exemplum. He stresses the paramount importance of a moral education in a child’s life, and this necessity probably cannot be stressed enough.

“10 Conversations” can be an interesting and enjoyable and informative book if you approach it expecting a random collection of occasionally enlightening and inspirational moral thoughts from a musing rabbi, as well as some general persuasion to convey your own morality to your children, but not if you approach it expecting a really useful parenting guide. As a parenting guide, it is unstructured, somewhat impractical, and narrowly concerned with a single aspect of parenting. It may inspire you to criticize your children less and give them more moral guidance, which is certainly a good thing, but it will not provide you with much in the way of practical advice for particular circumstances and challenges, or even for specific conversations, if that is what you are looking for.

I give the book three stars because it did tell me, personally, what I needed to hear at a particular stage in my struggle to be a decent parent, and it has inspired me to try to improve my interaction with my children and to commit myself and my time to a more positive and productive approach that focuses more on shaping character than on demanding compliance: “the longer short way.” In fact, I’m tempted to round it up to four stars because I tried a version of one of his “conversations” about “Who do you want to be?” on my daughter, and it seemed to have a positive impact on her attitude and behavior. I give the book a decent rating also simply because I tended to agree with his overall moral and philosophical positions (with some notable exceptions*). But I understand why the book has received a few low ratings, and I think it is owing to the (however unintentional) occasionally bombastic tone** of the author.

* As for my points of disagreement, I will address only one here. He devotes an entire chapter to “Honoring the Feminine.” While I agree with quite a bit of what he has to say here, he ultimately seems to be arguing for an opinion I cannot concede: that the feminine is inherently superior to the masculine and that allowing the feminine to overcome the masculine is “messianic progress.” I believe, rather, that the masculine and the feminine are equally valuable and are meant to balance one another, and that we do not need to seek to “feminize” men. (The ideal man, he says, is a “gay man that is attracted to women.”) I think part of his problem here is that he is confusing being masculine with being an ass. But there is nothing un-masculine about considering the feelings of others. I don’t think men need to “get in touch with their feminine” side; rather they need to understand the difference between being masculine and being macho. We should not seek to eradicate the masculine, but to balance it with the feminine. This is one of the primary virtues of marriage: it creates balance in human society. A world that was all feminine would not, in my opinion, be any better than a world that was all masculine.

** As for his tone, I offer two examples. One is when he says he notices at Shabbat dinner that his children are superior to all of the other children around the table. (Okay, he doesn’t really say that. But he vaguely implies it.) Another is when he congratulates himself for treating his Hispanic nanny as a human being, even if she isn’t white and educated like the au pairs who helped him raise his almost perfect children while he was in the UK. (Again, he didn’t really say that, but I could see how one could pick up that impression based on what he does say.) Then (did I say two? I think there’s going to be three examples) there’s the time he upbraids men for putting work as a priority before their children and then, not long after, relates a story in

which he goes to visit his kids, who have been away from both parents for two weeks at a camp in the Catskills (by the way, he insists his family is not well off, in case the book tours, television show, au pairs, and camps in the Catskills gave you that false impression), and his eleven-year-old begs him not to leave. He then tells us how he made her feel better with one of his “conversations” (although she did cry and cling to his leg a little) before leaving the 11-year-old in the camp (for who knows how many more weeks) and going back to his work.

Lisa says

One of the most inspiring yet simple books about parenting I've read. I've already put 2 of the conversations into action with my family and in only 1 day have seen some dramatic results. I will now always use this phrase when dealing with my sons actions that cause my disappointment: "it's not what you want to be when you grow up... It's who you want to be when you grow up."

Evan Micheals says

The theme of this book was about helping your children find their own values, it was sad that Boteach spent so much time attempting to impose his values as the right values to have... His critique of his tidiness exemplified this – Does he not know that untidiness is a symptom of creativeness?

Anyway otherwise the book was filled with good solid advice on how to nurture good relationships with your children. The trick with all advice is having the self discipline to follow it. The knowledge is kind of obvious (or seems so), the trick is doing it and doing it consistently. Worth a read even if it is just as an exercise in reflection. I suspect the references to Judaism will grate some people, but I was comfortable with them. I think Boteach liberal strand of Judaism comes through.

Kerry Pickens says

One of the best Jewish parenting books I have read. I don't agree with all of Rabbi Boteach's behavior, but he knows his parenting.

Jo says

Overall I liked the book and found some interesting ideas in it. But I did find that his way of talking to his kids was not something that would sit naturally with me. Not a whole lot of practical advice in the book and some of the examples seemd a little contrived.

Juliana says

how about
ten conversations you need to have with your parents.
i'll summarize:
leave me the fuck alone!!!

Brigid says

I liked the premise of this book, and that's why I picked it up--what did this author think are the 10 most important conversations to have with your kids. The author has much experience to draw on, what with being a parent and a family counselor. It's nice to read how he interacts with his own children. I agree wholeheartedly with most of his main points:

- help your child(ren) differentiate between social pressure and internal will,
- "the easy choice is seldom the right choice",
- "what kind of a person do you want to be?",
- help them have a happy childhood and live in the moment,
- don't let others determine your own self-esteem
- encourage intellectual curiosity
- bring them out of their virtual world because "life itself is exciting"
- "learn to be satisfied"
- every human being has dignity
- no one should be made to feel inferior
- forgiveness, family, tradition, love
- fear may mean you're feeling alone
- each person must decide his/her own value
- "do the right thing because it is right."

There are a few times I feel like the author veered off course: in the "Honoring the Feminine" chapter, he tends to generalize about women ("it is the wife how brings peacefulness into the home. It is the wife who cures the brokenness of the American male.") It seemed like he was overcompensating for some prior denigration of women he might have come out with at some earlier time.

The biggest problem I had was with the mythology chapter he titled "God". While I appreciate his viewpoint that Jewish people are encouraged to challenge their god and that they "have a right to demand justice from God", I can't imagine telling my son that "God controls the world". The random things that happen in our own lives, not to mention in the world at large, clearly show that no being is in control. Instead of having a god's approval determine our actions, we teach our son to "do the right thing because it is right." WE are the moral authority in our universe, WE are responsible for our actions, and we will have to live, and die, knowing that.

Growing up answering to the Catholic version of god, and my own earthly father, as the highest authorities in my life, I still don't do things under the auspices of pleasing either of them. I am nice, I am kind, I help other people. Some might argue that my father and the church's god instilled that in me, but I see it as a basic part of humanity.

Kristin says

Everyone who has - or works with - children should read this book. The chapters include:

Prologue: Why can't I get my child to listen? Why do I have to repeat everything? Why does every conversation end in an argument?

1. On Becoming a Person: The question becomes, "Who, not what, do you want to be?"
2. Childhood and Happiness: A person who was truly a child first, a person who experienced life as something wonderful and awe-inspiring, takes that with him into adulthood.
3. Knowledge and Inspiration: To me, the truly important question is this: "Are you intellectually curious?"
4. Bestowing Dignity: Every human being has value, and every human encounter is a fresh chance to let him know it.
5. Honoring the Feminine: Women nurture and enhance everything they come into contact with, men most of all.
6. Forgiveness: A child needs to understand one of the basic truths of forgiveness: When we forgive, we are doing it first and foremost for ourselves.
7. Family and Tradition: Far too many families nowadays live together as strangers.
- 8 Love: Love is the force in the universe that brings everything together; hate drives everything apart. Love is the gravity that unites us; hate the antigravity that rips us asunder.
9. Fear: A child who measures his self-worth through grades, popularity, and even his position on the Little League team will carry that into adulthood, and his entire life will be colored by skewed, fear-driven values.
10. God: The place of God in our life is to always remind us of the moral question. God demands righteousness.

Rabbi Boteach shares a lot of wisdom and insight from not only his experiences as a parent, but as an Orthodox Jewish rabbi who has his own TV show, "Shalom in the Home." While I don't share all of his religious beliefs, I still found them very interesting.

I think this book should be sent to all parents on their child's second birthday...before then, you might not be as likely to read it, I think! ;) I do think it should be required reading for all parents - the sooner, the better!

I

Pam says

I was really excited about this book for the first 100 pages or so & then I'm not sure what happened. I found Rabbi Boteach to be very passionate about what he believes in & I can see how some may find this to be arrogant or preachy. He has a passion for people & knowledge and honestly feels like he has a job to do with raising his children to be good people. I think if more parents had even half his passion & sense of responsibility for their own children the world would be a much better place. It takes an incredible amount of maturity & perseverance to rise above your own upbringing & try to do right (or at least better) with your own children. I was expecting more of a how to book & it was really just examples of conversation Rabbi Boteach has had with his children. Some of it was a little hard to relate to as I'm not Jewish or even religious in the traditional sense. The book has given me a few more ideas of what I'd like to instill in my child & now I have to do the work in figuring out how to deliver it.

marie says

Boteach is a rabbi who has written several self help books and had a tv show when this book was written. His ten conversations are the following:

1. The question becomes "who, not what, do you want to be?"
 - a) Every choice in life is subordinate to the moral choice.
 - b). Children are a blank slate on which we will do our writing.
 - c) Being a good person is not a choice we make only when it is convenient. You can never go wrong when you do the right thing.
 - d)Children have an innate sense of justice.

2. A person who was truly a child first, a person who experienced life as something wonderful and awe-inspiring, takes that with him into adulthood.
 - a) One of the great secrets of life is that you can control your emotions by controlling your actions.
 - b) Happiness is a critical component of childhood that keeps children young even when they are adults.

3. Are you intellectually curious?
 - a) There are plenty of good sources---moral, ethical, religious, spiritual--- but nothing can replace a PARENT.
 - b) The essence of life is to make ordinary things extraordinary, to make the natural miraculous, and to make the everyday unique.
 - c) Kids today have lost the capacity to be intrigued by life, partly because they are overstimulated by the make-believe.
 - d) Everything that happens in your life provides an opportunity for conversation with your children. You just have to train yourself to see it.

4. Every human being has value, and every human encounter is a fresh chance to let him know it.
 - a) Your foremost mission in life is to bestow dignity to all of God's creatures.
 - b) The way to gauge someone's morality is to see how they treat the people they don't need.

5. Women nurture and enhance everything they come in contact with, men most of all.

6. When we forgive, we are doing it first and foremost for ourselves.
 - a) Anger has become such a pervasive part of growing up today that it seems to be accepted as a rite of passage; this is a catastrophe.
 - b) Children will seldom talk to you about the things that hurt them.

7. Far too many families nowadays live together as strangers.
 - a) The child who knows himself, be it through routine, tradition or faith---is strengthened by that self-knowledge.

8. Love is the force in the universe that brings everything together.
 - a) You need to show your children what is in your heart.
 - b) A child who believes in love and feels your love will never be alone.

9. A child who measures his self-worth through grades, popularity and even his position in the Little League team will carry that into adulthood, and his entire life will be colored by skewed, fear-driven values.

10. The place of God is to remind us to be righteous.
 - a) Kids need to know that there is a moral context to the universe.
 - b) The greatest destroyer of childhood and of a child's security is purposelessness.
 - c) To do the right thing because it is right---that is the essence of the God conversation.

Prologue: 1. There are no bad children and no deliberately bad parents but there can be bad relationships because we do not really communicate with our children. We have to find creative ways to do so.

Our job as parents is to become a source of knowledge, guidance and inspiration; to help our children craft their own characters and to listen to their own inner voice.

The parent who inspires his children is generally the most successful parent.

There's too much "me", the tone is simplistic, but I learned. Heavily laced with Jewish beliefs and traditions (to the point of criticizing Christianity). He also invades his children's privacy too much.

(The reason why I could not finish Hitchhiker's immediately. I am giving away this book because I think I learned from it already.

Deanne says

I didn't agree with all that was written, but there are a handful of good parenting "nuggets" in there.

Carol says

How lame was this book? Why didn't an editor intervene at some point and say that this should have been a pamphlet? I thought the book was poorly and hastily written, the conversation ideas obvious, and the examples barely okay. The whole family seems arrogant to me. What a strange style in which to write a book: "What I say to my kids is..." "What I say to my kids is..." "What I say to my kids is..." on and on. I could not read most of it.
