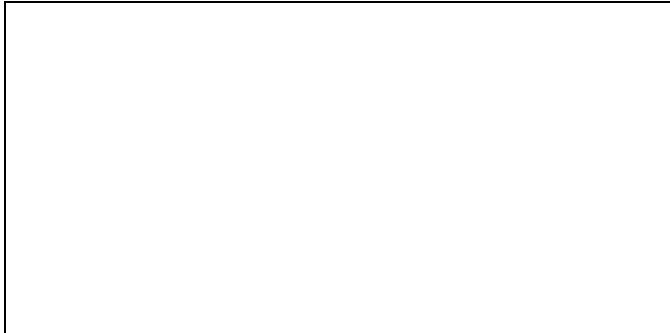


## Moms Are From Venus, Sons Are From Mars

*How to talk with -- and listen to -- your  
little boy so you understand each other better.*

By Janis Graham

"I don't like the couch pillows put on the floor because it gets them dirty!" I briskly announced to my four-year-old son, Kaspar, who was busy building a fort with cushions. Kaspar gave me a "What are you talking about?" look, then turned away and started playing again. Furious that I was being ignored, I quickly, loudly and angrily repeated myself. My tone of voice got his attention, but when he shot me a startled "What do you want?" look, I suddenly realized that Kaspar was tuning me out because he truly, genuinely didn't understand what it was I wanted.



Like many mothers, I am discovering that the older my son gets, the more our signals get crossed. Part of the problem is that I am not accustomed to expressing myself in brief and literal terms. Unwittingly, I am often indirect. Yet Kaspar needs me to be extremely to-the-point, explicit and clear. Unlike my six-year-old daughter, Addie, he simply doesn't pick up on unspoken requests or underlying messages. For example, if I had said to Addie, "I don't like the couch pillows on the floor because it gets them dirty," she would have instantly known that what I wanted was for her to pick up the cushions.

Why is it that my son and I are beginning to mis-

communicate more than my daughter and I ever have? "Just as grown men and women commonly misunderstand each other because they communicate in such different ways, so do sons and mothers often speak in different languages -- so much so that they can seem as if they are from different planets!" says John Gray, PhD, author of *Men are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Harper Collins).

Happily, experts say that it is easy to minimize mother-son language misunderstandings once you begin to identify and understand your son's different communication style. In other words, the more aware you become of your son's "gender-specific" reactions to speech patterns, the more effective you can be communicating with him, no matter what his age. As an added reward, the more sensitive you are to the ins and outs of "boy talk," the more likely it is your son will feel understood, appreciated and free to exchange his feelings and thoughts.

### The Root of Our Differences

No one knows for sure exactly *why* (beyond reproductive function) boys are different from girls; some researchers believe that "boys will be boys" because of biologic differences, while others feel the influence of cultural socialization is paramount. "But whatever the explanation, there is a wealth of evidence to indicate that boys begin to use language differently than girls do virtually from the time they start speaking," says Deborah Tannen, author of *Talking from 9 to 5* (Avon).

For example, studies seem to indicate that the "Mars factor" kicks in when little boys play: They adopt a hierarchial structure--there's a leader who tells the others

what to do and how to do it. Of course, this structure may be highly changeable. Especially with young kids, the same boy won't necessarily be the chief of the group all the time; instead, the boys will constantly jockey for the position of leader by getting the others to agree to their ideas, telling the best jokes and trying to verbally one-up each other ("My truck is the biggest" or "I can jump as high as the highest building").

"Boys monitor their relations--and the language of others--for subtle shifts in status by keeping track of who's giving orders and who's taking them," notes Tannen. "In the boys' social structure, being told what to do has more negative connotations than it does for girls, because it implies dominance or low status."

In contrast, the keynote of girls' play appears to be "intimacy"; the driving force of the "Venus influence" seems to be the desire to be liked and included. And this is reflected in how a girl speaks among her peers. Because she is less interested in directly challenging her playmates, she might, for instance, say "Let's do this" or "I want that one," whereas a boy might say "Now we are going to do this!" or "Gimme that!" This is not to imply that girls don't fight and try to dominate at times, or that boys never attempt to compromise in their quest for leadership--it simply suggests that ultimately what they want and how they go about asking for it are different.

Other differences in communication styles that seem to surface at quite a young age: Girls tend to maintain direct eye contact with each other as they speak, while boys seem to be uncomfortable with it, only speaking with each other as they actively play. "This is probably because the pathway to closeness for boys is through sharing experiences with each other," notes Ann F. Caron, author of *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons: Raising the Next Generation of Men* (Harper Collins). "Many studies have suggested that it is through 'doing' that boys meet, make friends and develop intimacy and closeness, while girls make connections and get to know each other through talking."

Boys, in fact, may feel somewhat threatened when forced to listen or speak while maintaining direct eye contact. "Among boys, direct eye contact is often the first signal that a challenge is going to be made or an order given," says John Gray. "That's why when Mom says 'Look at me when I'm talking to you!' the son often becomes quite angry. It makes him feel humiliated and put down."

In addition, boys tend to insist "I can do it myself" (even when they can't!) more often, more vehemently and at earlier ages than girls. The reason for this, according to Gray: "The process of becoming an individual is different for a boy than for a girl. A girl becomes an individual through relating more to her mother, becoming *like* her mother. A little boy's identity is forged by becoming *unlike* his mother--he needs to prove that he is independent, competent and, above all *different*."

Finally, as boys reach the older elementary-school ages, silence appears to become an essential part of their communication style. Whereas girls (and women) are more inclined to "talk things out," boys (and men) may want to reflect on things for a while, mulling them over for a spell before discussing them. This difference commonly causes trouble, resulting in Mom feeling shut out or rejected by her son when he won't speak about personal matters and the son feeling pressured to talk before he is ready.

### Nine Tips for Better Mom-Son Communication

OK, so boys are on a different wavelength. What's a mother to do about it? If she consciously tries to work around her son's style of communication, won't she be reinforcing male stereotypes? "I don't think so," answers Caron. "There are some universal male-female differences of style of communication. Neither way is necessarily better--only different. So cultivating the ability to get through to your son is a wonderful way to face reality as you seek to have the most productive, loving relationship possible with him."

Here, then, are some concrete suggestions for enhancing mom-son interchanges.

#### **1. Make requests using five words or less.**

"Boys use words to get things done: they expect words to specifically instruct them," says Don Elium, coauthor with his wife Jeanne of *Raising a Son* (Celestial Arts). "So when a mother uses five words or less in a request, such as 'Pick up the blocks now,' she's using language in a way that her son naturally understands, getting his attention and riveting his focus on what needs to be done."

You may be thinking "I already do that." But think again: Because women in general tend to use words to connect and to establish understanding, chances are you use a lot more words than you realize. For example, you may precede your request by saying something like "Now, honey, you know that you aren't supposed to leave the blocks scattered all over the floor. Somebody might trip on them if you leave them there. I'd like you to pick them up before that happens." What kind of effect does a discourse like that have on a son? "Boys, in particular, will start getting anxious and begin tuning Mom out when they hear a long sermon or explanation. Boys just want to know what you want done!" says Don Elium.

Interestingly, it may be harder than you think to get into the habit of making shortly worded requests. "Women often feel as if they are being rude or insulting when they speak like this, but boys thrive on it," says Elium. Of course, just because "less is best" doesn't mean your son will jump up instantly and carry out your request. You may have to increase the intensity of your words if he doesn't respond the first time. You may also have to combine some of the tactics that follow for engaging his attention and cooperation.

**2. Phrase requests using "would" or "will."** In an attempt to avoid seeming too demanding or pushy, women frequently couch their requests in language containing the words "could" or "can." But, points out Gray, these are words that request information, not action. If you ask your son if he "could" let the cat out, he might legitimately respond "Yeah, Mom, I have two feet and hands and am capable of opening the door." But if you say "Will you let the cat out?", the request is explicit, unopen to misinterpretation. Your son won't have to second-guess you. And you'll minimize the number of times you become angry at him because he hasn't been clued into the underlying message you are trying to convey.

**3. Word things positively, not negatively.** Boys, especially, respond to threats as if they are a challenge. They'll refuse to back down (since it would be an acknowledgement that they are powerless or scared). The result is that when you threaten, you may get pushed into an intense power struggle that leaves you feeling ineffective and dissatisfied.

So instead of saying "If you don't get your pajamas on

right now, you won't get a snack and a story," you might simply say something like "It's time for a snack and a story. Get your pajamas on," or "As soon as you get your pjs on, we can have a snack."

**4. Make a deal.** Here's another alternative to simply ordering your son around or using threats: Instead of telling your rambunctious kindergartner "You better be quiet during church or else!" you might try bargaining. Boys, especially, may feel empowered if they are allowed to gain something in return for giving something up. Perhaps, then, your son can go to his favorite playground in exchange for sitting quietly during service.

**5. Avoid rhetorical questions.** Don't say, "How could you possibly have forgotten?" or "Why didn't you clean up your room?" These questions are not really begging for an answer, nor is it possible for your son to respond to them satisfactorily. "Such questions imply that the child is completely incompetent; they make him feel attacked, criticized and cornered," says Gray. "As a result, your son is more likely to feel angry at you than motivated to cooperate."

Instead, it is better to vent your frustration in a direct, clear way. So try replacing "What could you possibly have been thinking when you didn't come home on time again?" with "I am angry because this is the second time you missed coming home for dinner on time!"

**6. Get into the habit of saying, "Tell me about..."** For a woman, being asked a question is like a welcome mat--it gives her the entree or permission to talk about herself. But questions can make boys feel boxed in, "bugged," on the spot. So when moms interrogate their sons, barraging them with a demanding set of questions ("What did you do at school today? How did you do on your math test? Who did you play with at recess?"), sons may respond with answers like "Yeah," "Nope," "I don't know." A more effective way to start a conversation would be to say, "Tell me about the math test." This depressurizes the query and gives your son some breathing room to respond.

Another good idea is to invite your son to talk while you're doing something together. If you say "Let's talk," implying you want to sit down for a chat, he'll feel awkward, says Peter L. Sheras, PhD, associate professor of education at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. "Try cooking together or throwing a

ball around--it's the best way to encourage comfortable, relaxed discussion about feelings and personal matters," says Sheras. "With boys, the more you communicate in the context of action and activity, the more likely it is that conversation will flow."

**7. Accept "boy/guy" talk.** Because boys' interests are frequently very different from those of girls, the metaphors, similes and even slang boys use will be derived from these interests. If your son loves snowboarding, for example, he may start to bandy about words from that world. As long as the language isn't rude, a mother's best defense is to find out exactly what her son means, than let him express himself as he likes. Don't, in other words, discourage communication by constantly correcting or putting down your son's quirky way of expressing himself. In fact, you may even find that using his language yourself is an excellent way of getting his attention.

**8. Brainstorm with your son for solutions.** "A great way to sidestep many control issues and power struggles is to allow your son to have some say about rules and decisions," says Susan Heitler, PhD, a clinical psychologist in private practice in Denver and author of *From Conflict to Resolution* (Norton). "Boys are very preoccupied about who is calling the shots; by allowing a son to have some input and influence on rules, he will feel his opinion is being respected and thus be more willing to cooperate." For example, to defuse nightly battles, you might involve your elementary-school-age son in a discussion about how to best set up a going-to-bed routine. Or you might let him choose from a list of chores and ask him to set up his own system or schedule for getting them done each week.

**9. Teach your son the art of conversation.** To encourage your son to share his feelings and experiences more freely with you, as well as help him develop a sense of curiosity and interest in others, you need to show him how to have a real conversation.

"In too many families, the art of conversation has been lost," says Heitler. "Moms give their sons directives, corrections, orders. They don't engage them in dialogue

or invite them to really share information about themselves." Mothers, especially, may get so in the habit of focusing on their children's needs that they fail to talk about themselves, what they do at work, why it is important to them, what they think about various world issues, etc. "When you take some time, each night at dinner, for example, to not only ask your son about his day but to tell a little about your day, you help teach him how to exchange information and alternate self-focus with focus on others," says Heitler. Your son will learn how to listen to a woman, be an audience for her and be curious about what is important to her--wonderful traits for any man to have!

As you may have noticed, any of these suggestions simply help you to communicate more clearly, which means they would also be effective with daughters. All in all, though, I'm more conscious of needing communication advice and strategies when dealing with my son. Still, my conversations and interchanges with Kaspar are becoming increasingly more productive (and less frustrating) the more familiar I become with his way of talking.

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