

Voice Lessons for Parents

Dr. Wendy Mogel

Book Group and Parenting Class Discussion Guide

Welcome! This discussion guide was developed to help parents who would like to participate in a book group or parenting class using the concepts in *Voice Lessons for Parents* as a foundation. There are many venues in which you can use the ideas in the guide, including:

- Book club discussion groups
- Grade-level parent meetings at your child's school
- Faculty in-service workshops
- Community center or neighborhood parent support groups
- Individual guidance while reading *Voice Lessons for Parents*
- Online chat groups

Setting Up a Parenting Class or Discussion Group

If you're interested in gathering a group of parents together to discuss issues of concern, below are some general guidelines you may find useful

Size and Participants

Parent groups can range from a minimum of six members for informal parent support groups to up to twenty participants for professionally led parenting classes. With fewer than six members you run the risk that typical rates of attrition, plus one or two

parents home with a sick child or a competing commitment, may leave the group with only two members—intimate but without the potential for the same vitality and shared learning that a larger group affords. A good group size is twelve. Classes work best when the parents have children in the same age range: early elementary, later elementary, middle school, or high school.

When and Where

Groups can meet in members' homes or after drop-off or pick-up at school. Weekdays work well for parents with flexible schedules, but weeknights or weekends make sense for others.

Length and Frequency

No matter how dedicated and enthusiastic, every group needs ten minutes for the arrival of stragglers and for settling in and warming up. An hour and forty-five minutes to two hours is an ideal group length. With less time the group is not worth the effort of investing in child care and travel.

Weekly meetings for six consecutive weeks work well for parenting classes with a designated leader and structured curriculum. Leaderless support groups often meet less frequently (biweekly or monthly) but continue for months or even years.

Rules For Parenting Groups

Some guidelines will help things run smoothly. During the first meeting, the group can decide whether or not a set of explicit guidelines is needed. Here are some rules groups have adopted:

- Meeting times will be established during the first meeting and won't be changed to accommodate the schedules of individual group members.
- No recording of the meeting for spouse or friends.
- Out of courtesy, any group member who is unable to attend the next upcoming meeting will alert the leader or designated person in charge of organizational details.
- Since latecomers distract others, everyone will make the commitment to arrive on time.
- For classes held at the school attended by the children: the topics of the administration, teachers, and curriculum are off limits.
- Phrase comments in positive terms, do not criticize one another, and respect opinions that diverge from your own.
- Parents agree to keep what is said in the group confidential. Confessions, complaints, and problems will not be repeated outside of the group.
- No one should be pressured to reveal anything about themselves or their family if they choose not to. If group members are responding to questions "around the table," any member can decline to speak by saying, "I pass."

Discussing Voice Lessons for Parents

This guide includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your understanding of the principles presented in the book. The suggested questions are intended to help you recognize cultural pressures that create obstacles to rich family communication and target both habits you wish to break and strengths you want to preserve. We hope these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment

of the book.

Exploring these ideas in a group setting (in person or online!) has a dual purpose: you can support each other as you try out new approaches and techniques while practicing the deeply pleasurable art of conversation . . . with one another.

Introduction

In *Voice Lessons for Parents*, *New York Times*–bestselling author and renowned parenting expert Wendy Mogel offers an essential guide to the new art of talking to children and shows how a change in voice can transform conversations and ease the relationships between parents and children. Delving into sources as diverse as neuroscience, fairy tales, and anthropology, Mogel offers specific guidance for talking to children across the expanse of childhood and adolescence. She also explains the best ways to talk about your child to grandparents, partners, and exes, and to teachers, coaches, and caretakers. Throughout the book, Mogel addresses an obstacle that flummoxes even the most seasoned and confident parent: the distraction of digital devices, how they impact our connection with our families, and what we can do about it.

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Dr. Mogel highlights a study that found a 71-percent increase in schoolchildren needing expert help for speech and language difficulties between 2007 and 2011—the early years of the iPhone. How do you moderate your own use of devices and your children’s screen time? What approaches have you tried that were ineffective? What old-school tactics or novel hacks are working in your family?

2. Dr. Mogel talks about the concept of making deposits in the “bank of goodwill.”

Advertisers work hard to convince children that what they *want* is what they need. How can your family resist the allure of a consumer model of happiness and embrace practices that “make memories”? How do you define goodwill differently for each child?

3. Discuss some of the daily obstacles to the art of listening. Discuss the payoffs you’ve experienced.

4. Discuss ways to apply the model of being a fellow traveller and creativity curator in the realms of your child’s natural worries, expansive imagination, and bad dreams.

5. Many parents struggle to find a balance—when to protect a child and when to loosen the reins. How do you decide when to back off and let your child learn on his or her own versus when to step in? Share a time you graciously provided needed support. Share the benefits you’ve reaped by allowing your child to problem-solve independently.

6. The internet bombards children with all sorts of information, regardless of their age. From sex and violence to society’s beauty ideals and beyond, it’s a scary place to navigate, even for adults. After reading *Voice Lessons for Parents*, how might you approach the topic of media literacy with your child?

7. Mogel quotes Virginia Woolf when referring to the “great cathedral space” of childhood and posits, as Woolf does, that parents should be at the center. What does this mean to you? How do you envision the cathedral—and your position within it—changing

as your child grows and matures?

8. When, where, and how do you and your partner in parenting talk about your child? How do you approach conversations with your child's coaches, teachers, or other caretakers? What do you wish to do differently? What approaches might you consider even though they may tax your self-discipline or are not the norm in your community?

9. Mogel frequently highlights an aspect of parental anxiety that she refers to as "AP Parenting"—the notion that every decision has to be the right one. How are unrealistic standards of flawless parenting defined in your community? How can you gather courage to resist a "compare and despair" mode of judging yourself and your child? How can you reassure yourself that it is not harmful to tell your child that you've changed your plans?

10. Think back to a few of the fights you have had with your teenager. Do these conversations follow any particular patterns? What would be a more productive way to resolve conflict and enjoy your time together?

11. Mogel refers to teenagers as "spirit guides in disguise." When has your teenager taught you something or said something that surprised you? Discuss.

12. Mogel has plenty of warnings about too much screen time—whether it's iPhones or video games or just too much TV. But she also suggests tech as a great way to bridge the gap with your kids, especially teenagers. Brainstorm some tech-based activities you and your child can do together.

13. Think about the most recent conversation you had with your child. What did you talk about? After reading *Voice Lessons for Parents*, can you identify ways to enhance, enrich, or streamline the communication?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Put away your phones. Too often, our cell phones and screens are dragging our attention away from where it should be—our work, our friends, our spouses, and our kids. Try keeping your phones out of sight for one meeting. See how it goes.
2. Role play! Pick a partner and act out the kind of recurring tense morning interchange, after-school inquisition, homework battle, or road trip emotional blow-out you might have with your child. Now try it again in “*Voice Lessons mode*,” testing out some of Mogel’s tips for moderating your speech tempo, tone, volume, and pitch.
3. Select one or two titles from Dr. Mogel’s “Recommended Reading” list and continue the conversation!