

Mother Nurture

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Translating Mom-Speak and Dad-Speak

Sometimes it seems like Eric and I are speaking different languages. For example, when I think we're just talking about how we're each feeling about something, he thinks we're trying to identify some problem and solve it. I end up feeling like he's not really listening to me, and he ends up feeling frustrated that we're not getting anywhere.

In relationships, women generally tend to focus on feeling connected, while men are sensitive to status and dominance. For instance, a mother could think her husband will welcome her knowledge because he wants to come together with her in raising their children. Yet he could interpret her parenting tips as condescending or controlling.

Similarly, in conversation, women emphasize the process of being together, concrete consequences for specific people, and feelings, while men tend to emphasize tasks and outcomes, impersonal perspectives, and information.

Each gender style is valid, like it's valid to be Italian or Swedish. Skill with the other gender's style lets you shift gears effectively, depending on what's needed. It's completely alright – and often necessary! – to ask your partner to communicate with you in a way that's closer to what you need as a woman.

For example, a man who is skillful at “mom-speak” can:

- Accept your feelings instead of trying to talk you out of them; hear you out instead of trying to solve the problem
- Ask questions about your thoughts and feelings; ask three or more questions in a row (and not “How am I doing?”!)
- Nod, smile, make eye contact, say “yeah” frequently, etc. to let you know he's with you; encourage you to say more; focus on the conversation going well more than any practical outcome
- Let himself be moved emotionally; express an empathic understanding; offer relevant self-disclosure
- Understand that your (often greater) expertise about the children is not a threat but an asset for him and the family; be confident enough in his own parenting to ask for suggestions or help
- Realize that you need to ask him questions about his schedule, whereabouts, or plans in order to coordinate with him, not to be bossy; recognize that you are not trying to control him
- Be willing to talk about problems instead of thinking they might reveal an embarrassing flaw; realize that raising a family means one trouble after another

- Recognize that you need to be able to talk about your children or marriage with close friends
- Above all, communicate that he cares about you and wants to stay connected

And a woman who is skillful “dad-speak” can:

- Pay attention to her husband’s reactions to issues of power, dominance, and status; be careful about orders, put-downs, or ultimatums
- “Knock before entering” by asking him if this is a good time to talk (he should name another one if it isn’t)
- Explain the principles, values, or goals that guide her thinking; be direct about what she wants
- Consider sometimes listening as one man would to another, with less of the chiming in and personal statements she might use with another woman
- Understand that he may not feel his passing thoughts are worth sharing, so his quiet does not necessarily mean that he is not listening; understand that he may regard personal questions as potentially intrusive, so his lack of inquiry into her world could be respectful rather than uncaring
- Realize that his detached verbal style does not mean he wants to distance himself from his wife
- Recognize that his debate-style challenges are to him fair play in an ongoing interaction, not a personal attack: more like a strong move to the hoop than walking off the court
- Be judicious in what she says about him or her family to others
- Above all, communicate respect for his autonomy; make it clear that she is simply trying to work together as equal partners in the best interests of the children

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