



PROGRAM SUMMARY

2013 Fall Speaker: Dr. Brad Sachs

National Cathedral School

October 16, 2013

Mighty Words: Creating Conversations that Change Children's Lives

Dr. Brad Sachs

On October 16, 2013, the Parents Council of Washington hosted its fall speaker program at the National Cathedral School. The featured speaker was Dr. Brad Sachs

Board Member Melanie Mason welcomed attendees and thanked the National Cathedral School for hosting the event. Ms. Mason introduced the Parents Association President of the National Cathedral School, Ms. Kathy Horvath, who welcomed everyone to the Cathedral Close and provided a few historical facts about the school. Ms. Mason then introduced Dr. Brad Sachs, psychologist, educator, consultant, best-selling author and Founder and Director of The Father Center that specializes in meeting the needs of new, expectant, and experienced fathers.

Dr. Sachs opened his presentation, entitled "Mighty Words: Creating Conversations that Change Children's Lives," by thanking Board Member Bettina Helsing and the Director of Parent Relations at NCS, Kate Hornyan for their assistance in organizing the presentation.

As parents, Dr. Sachs explained that the main goal in engaging in conversations with our children is not to change their behavior or their attitudes, but instead, to focus on

meaningful ways to develop empathy. We need to help our children get in touch with themselves and their own humanity. When communication starts to be compressed, we lose our children's interest. We tend to begin blaming each other and wind up irritating each other. Dr. Sachs made the distinction between "Irritating v. Irrigating," noting that we should aim to "irrigate" or stimulate our children to engage in a discussion with themselves.

Dr. Sachs then asked participants to relax and listen while he played a brief piano piece. When listening to music, he explained that we tend to pay attention to what we are feeling. Music infiltrates and there is no other choice but to respond to it. Music serves as a paradigm for when we talk to children. Dr. Sachs introduced four components of conversations with our children: (1) Empathy, (2) Curiosity, (3) Viewing problems as solutions, and (4) Psychodialysis.

Fostering Empathy

Empathy is part of our circuitry. We are all born with the capacity to develop empathy, to nurture and connect with compassion. We have the innate ability to not only feel what another person is feeling, but can also respond to those feelings.

In some cases, there may be empathy imbalances. There may be too little identification (using the example of The Simpsons cartoon) or too much. When we are too close, we lose the capacity to reach out to our children and to care for them. The key is to remain alive to the "otherness" of our children as well as our own childhood experience.

The Importance of Curiosity

Conversations between parents and children should be designed to attract children's curiosity about who they are and why they do what they do in order to allow them to discover a sense of meaning and purpose behind their actions. The concept of curiosity is for children to ask themselves "Who do I become under the expectations that I impose upon myself" and "How do I develop those expectations?" This allows them to begin thinking about who they are becoming as they grow. Parents need to be careful not to atrophy their children's curiosity muscle. We do not want to influence and permeate who we want them to become, but rather, we want to help them develop on their own. Parents simply need to plant the seed that stimulates curiosity.

Impediments to Good Conversations

Dr. Sachs then discussed impediments to good conversations. Children project all of the uncomfortable emotions that they are feeling onto adults and we tend to return softer

feelings. Children also prefer to fight with others rather than themselves. Parents become “containers” of their children’s feelings.

Other impediments involve the problem of expectations vs. reality. We impose high expectations on our children, but the reality is that they will not meet those expectations. In other words, almost by definition, our own expectations for our children make it almost certain that they will disappoint us. We understand the discrepancies, but have fantasies of who our children will be. We have conscious expectations, wishes and ambitions for our children as well as unconscious ones. We anticipate that our children will do what we wish we had done but never did or that they better not do what we did, or that they must fulfill their potential and our own, etc. Examples of unconscious expectations are that our children must reflect well on us and the parenting choices we have made, erase our visible and invisible flaws and failures, or make us immortal with their achievements or accomplishments.

When children do not meet parental expectations, parents start to over-focus and become hypercritical. They may become angry, blame the child, themselves, or others. All of these emotions impede good conversations.

What Are the Characteristics of Mighty Words Conversations?

Dr. Sachs continued that “mighty words” conversations are not to be a cross-examination, sermon, lecture or interrogation, but rather, must be inquiries designed to stimulate curiosity. This curiosity, in turn, will connect us with our children and our children with themselves. Specifically, “mighty words” conversations should:

- Induce further thought by the child; we need to plant a seed in our children’s head in order for them to have a dialogue within themselves; there should be no rigidly anticipated conclusion.
- Prompt the child toward closeness with others and themselves.
- Encourage the child to engage in self-discovery and learn new ways of finding meaning in the world.
- Stimulate us to learn about ourselves from our child.

Ultimately, individuals that create something new together connect in new ways to each other. Dr. Sachs emphasizes that it’s all in the delivery of our words. Parents must be more receptive to and interested in the child’s experience than he or she is. Rather than being disappointed or frustrated, parents must engineer change. Promoting self-awareness fulfills every child’s needs. Focus should be on fertilizing the soil not

germinating the seed. The less the child reacts to us, the more he or she reacts to himself.

Virtuous Cycle vs. Vicious Cycle

Dr. Sachs then gave specific questions to ask while in discussion with our children. These include:

- What were you trying to accomplish when you acted as you did?
- What alternatives presented themselves?
- How did you decide which alternative to pursue?
- How do you feel about your choice, and how did it work out?
- What would you do differently next time?

Engaging in these types of inquiries helps children develop a reason and solution behind their behavior. It allows them to reflect on who they are and who they want to become, and on how they can make their lives, the lives of others and the world better as a whole.

Parents also need to engage in their own personal reflections and ask themselves:

- What am I expecting of my child?
- Why am I expecting this?
- Was this something that was expected of me?
- Do I currently expect this of myself?
- Have I always met this expectation?

Listening

Dr. Sachs discussed how listening is an important component of conversation and that parents have difficulty with this. Listening is not confusing honesty with disrespect, confusing a desire to discuss as disobedience, confusing lack of self-awareness as avoidance. Listening is important because it minimizes criticism and induces curiosity. This curiosity, in turn, gives children hope for the future and an increased resolve to change and grow rather than creating feelings of shame, guilt and disappointment.

Sample Conversations

To provide a concrete example of all of the components discussed, Dr. Sachs shared four hypothetical conversations involving children of different age groups, ranging from young children all the way through older teens. He provided a four-step approach where the parent would “engage, counter, plant and back off.” Each conversation concluded

with the child becoming more aware of his or her own challenge. The parent planted the seed and, without forcing a solution on the child, instead allowed the seed to germinate through the child's own personal reflection. A key moment in the conversation occurred when the child admitted "I don't know what to do." At this point, it is important to let the conversation end so that the child can sit with his or her own thoughts. Dr. Sachs stressed that parents should not underestimate their children; they will figure out a solution to the problem if we focus on allowing them to open up to themselves instead of to us. The key is to not manipulate our children; if we do, they pull away.

For example, in a conversation with a young child about his misbehavior at school, by providing speculation and pushing the conversation further, the parent helped the child to shift from feelings of shame over hitting a classmate at school to showing sensitivity and compassion.

The sample conversations with young and older teens involved more challenging topics ranging from cellphone misuse to sexual activity to drug use. The goal with older children, said Dr. Sachs, is to promote their intellect and autonomy and offer collaboration. By showing interest, sticking through tough dialogues, conveying a sense of understanding, and letting the child know their behavior was out of character, the child developed a trust in the parent. The child then opened up further, engaged in reflection and invited the parent in for a solution. In these instances, parental reassurance was meaningless and no interrogations were necessary because the child became highly self-aware.

In summary, the best approach for a parent is to promote the child's awareness of her own intelligence, praise her ability to problem-solve, and induce her curiosity about herself. Pursue conversations without judgment or criticism. Engage, encourage and then back off. A solution will present itself and the child will become more self-assured.

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