

What's Wrong with "I-Messages"?

by Jane Bluestein, Ph.D.

A man in one of my workshops once told me how hard it had been for him to learn to express his feelings. "At first," he said, "it would usually sound like, 'I feel you should take the trash out' or 'I feel you're really depressed.'" He has since learned a great deal about feelings. However, he discovered that early on, sharing what he thought were his feelings was actually attempts to control others.

How often, when we are learning new skills for growth and self-care, do we inadvertently misuse or mishandle them? Case in point: I-messages.

Briefly, I-messages are statements that can be used as a way of taking responsibility for one's own feelings in conflict situations. Generally beginning with the word "I," they were developed to offer an alternative to the more destructive "You-messages" that attack, blame or criticize someone else. For example, I-messages allow us to say, "I'm angry about this mess," instead of "You kids are such inconsiderate slob!" or "You make me so angry!" In this sense, I-messages are a small step forward in healthy interactions. (However if our desire is to motivate the kids to clean up their mess, there are other, less emotionally-loaded ways of accomplishing this goal, strategies that don't rely on our anger or other feelings to generate cooperation and commitment from others. More about these strategies later in this article.) An even better example of a healthy I-message might include something like, "I'm afraid of spiders," "I'm really sad my friend is moving," or "I'm too angry to call her back now." These statements demonstrate honest and responsible ownership of one's own state of mind.

So what's the problem?

Unfortunately, most I-messages don't sound like these last three examples. In fact, this strategy is most often presented as a formula, one structured in the following manner: "When you (exhibit or neglect to exhibit a certain behavior), I feel (a certain feeling)" or "I feel _____ when you _____." Perhaps once a well-intended communications tool, these messages carry certain risks which may not be immediately

evident, and are frequently used in ways that produce negative and unwanted results.

For starters, I-messages are basically just dressed-up You-messages, and like You-messages, they connect my feelings with your behavior. Although they start with (or include) the word I, the statements carry the same energetic impact as messages of blame, ones which blatantly state, “You (or your behaviors) make me feel...” As such, I-messages simply give us new language for manipulation and projecting. Even worse, they become a tool for self-victimization, as they present us as emotionally vulnerable to someone’s behavioral choices.

We also can get into trouble when we, like the man in my workshop, attempt to use I-messages to control or change someone. Simply stating feelings is one thing. But there is particular danger when we structure I-messages to suggest that the other person’s behavior is responsible for our feelings, especially when the statements carry the implication that we’d feel better if only the other person would act differently. Further, this approach is only likely to work if the other person is willing to take responsibility for our emotional state, and cares or feels guilty enough to change solely for its sake.

Even when this approach works, it comes at a great cost. We certainly don’t want to burden others, especially our children with the overwhelming— and impossible— responsibility for our happiness and well-being. Remember that personal growth and self-responsibility typically involve learning to separate who we are and how we feel about ourselves from other people’s behaviors. The tendency to connect our peace of mind with our children’s choices, achievements or appearance leaves us continually vulnerable to all sorts of things over which we have limited control.

Now the formula typically used to create an I-message certainly has the attraction of a quick-fix solution, and may have a certain appeal to people who are concerned that simply asking for what we want— a behavior that is often discouraged in our culture— may seem a bit too aggressive or incendiary. There are, however, many ways to set a boundary, request a different behavior or get what we want from

others in our lives without bullying them. (I suspect that to a certain extent, some proponents of I-messages are motivated by a fear of other people's reactions to a more direct, assertive request, or assume that the other person would not take advantage of the vulnerability we exhibit by sharing our feelings as a result of their behavior. In some instances, that may indeed occur, but these types of interactions require a staggering amount of intimacy and goodwill, qualities often absent in the relationships in which the use of these messages are often recommended!)

Others argue that using feelings to motivate others is more honest somehow than simply setting a boundary or requesting a particular behavior. However, many people who have been on the receiving end of an I-message report seeing this approach as extremely dishonest and manipulative. Several mentioned feeling more than a bit put-upon by having someone attempt to dump responsibility for their emotional well-being on them. And more than one individual shared that this approach actually had the opposite effect, creating resentment and alienation, rather than compassion and cooperation!

Let's work this through: Perhaps you say, "I feel sad when you get poor grades" in an attempt to encourage your child's achievement in school. Now this statement may indeed be an accurate assessment of your feelings, but it also suggests that your feelings are the result of your child's behavior and, in this instance, that your happiness depends on him getting a good report card. If this is truly the case, that you simply can't feel happy unless your children are doing well in school, it's a safe bet that it's not about the grades. The issue may be far more about your sense of adequacy as a parent, the need to look good to others or your desire for whatever status your children's accomplishments might bring you. Wanting your children to do well is quite different from attaching your emotional well-being to their achievement.

But let's say it works. You say, "I feel sad when you get poor grades" and suddenly, your child begins to apply himself and pulls his grades up! However, what's likely to be behind the change in his behavior? Perhaps the improvement was indeed driven by his attempts to keep you from feeling sad, or to protect himself from your

disappointment (withdrawal of your conditional approval). But this is a very different motivation from, say, the satisfaction of personal achievement, the desire to learn something new, or even the intention to gain access to certain privileges that come with such improvement—motivators that do not depend on someone else’s approval or reaction, motivators which in no way compromise the child’s sense of worth or emotional safety.

Parent and child, heart-to-heart Likewise, let’s say your child’s teacher tells him, “When you forget your library books, I feel angry and frustrated!” Assuming your child cares enough— or is threatened enough— to be motivated by the teacher’s feelings, wouldn’t you prefer that he be motivated to return library books so he can take out some new ones, rather than cooperating in order to emotionally care-take his teacher (or protect himself from the outcomes of the teacher’s feelings)?

Parents who cringe at the thought of telling their children, “You’d better behave. You don’t want Daddy to start drinking again!” might easily slip with a statement like, “I get really hurt when you two don’t get along,” or even “I feel so happy when you make your bed.” Whether extreme or seemingly benign, all three statements make the child responsible for the parents’ state of mind, and convey the impression that the child somehow has the power to control how Mommy and Daddy act and feel.

There are several dangers here. Ask any adult who grew up in a troubled home who has had to reconcile the shame and frustration of not being able to keep a parent happy, calm or sober, no matter how well she behaved, how quietly she played or how many “A’s” she brought home on her report card. Additionally, these kinds of statements build dependence on external approval, teaching children to choose their behaviors on the basis of other people’s potential reactions and opinions. And when it comes to getting the approval of adults and peers who might not be safe or protective, or those who might not have our kids’ best interests in mind, this is exactly what most adults don’t want their children to do. It’s not fair to complain about the power of peer pressure when we keep communicating to kids that their likeability, approval and emotional safety are the conditional results of doing what other people want and expect, from

automatically putting the wishes of others ahead of their own, or from simply doing what makes other people happy.

Please note that I am not suggesting for a second that we teach kids to be inconsiderate of others. However, people-pleasing and emotional care-taking are not the same as respect and consideration; they are much more about equating our safety and self-worth with others' reactions and opinions, and making choices simply to self-protect. (Think of adults you know who tolerate neglectful, disrespectful or abusive behavior out of fear of the additional conflict they might encounter if they stand up for themselves and ask for what they want? We certainly want better for our children.) Healthy cooperation, respect, compassion, consideration and service come from quite a different place, one that respects the needs and feelings of others, one in which conditional self-worth or emotional safety are never an issue. Ultimately, we want to encourage these qualities—which, incidentally, is much easier to do in relationships that aren't burdened by power struggles, over-enmeshment or manipulation.

Aside from the obvious dangers in reinforcing people-pleasing, telling a child you'll feel happy, proud or less angry if he does what you want puts him in the often painful position of having to choose between your feelings and his own when his needs are different from yours. Once again, consider your intention. In most instances, people report that they use I-messages (or teach others to use I messages) to get others to change thoughtless or hurtful behavior, or to simply get others to behave in a way that is more desirable to the person communicating the I-message. However, using I-messages assumes that the other person cares more about your feelings than about whatever satisfaction he gets from continuing to behave the way he's behaving. What if he doesn't care? What if he isn't afraid of your anger or disappointment? And in fact, what if his intention is to be hurtful, or to inflict some form of emotional discomfort? In that case, using an I-message simply communicates that his strategy has been successful.

There are a few other issues to consider. While older children may have learned that compliance protects their safety and self-esteem, and that agreeing to do what you want may get you off their backs (regardless of their actual intentions to cooperate), very young children may have difficulty identifying with another person's feelings. And

children of all ages may resist if they are competing with you for power.

In talking about “I-messages,” there are really two issues here. One is the desire to motivate certain behaviors or develop particular attitudes in your children. The other is the array of feelings, reactions and issues that get triggered— feelings you experience— along the way. Both of these are real, reasonable and important, and each is a separate issue to be dealt with, each in different ways.

If you simply want your children to change their behavior, then you probably don’t need to express your feelings in the first place. There are several ways to eliminate your feelings from the equation. If your child is being obnoxious or disrespectful, you don’t have to talk about how much her attitude upsets you or hurts your feelings. You do, however, need to refuse to accept, support, engage or encourage unacceptable behavior— and you can even do this without criticizing her attitude, making her wrong or pointing out that her behavior is unacceptable.

If you’re good at this (or feeling particularly generous), you can validate her feelings: “I can see you’re very upset about this.” But absolutely disengage by setting a boundary, making it clear that your further participation is contingent upon her talking to you in a civilized fashion: “I want to hear about this when you can talk without yelling or attacking. Let’s try again in a little bit.” And then walk away. This sends quite a different message from a statement that suggests that she is controlling how you feel— which, incidentally, may be exactly what she’s trying to do. (This approach also offers a healthy, self-caring and assertive model for your kids to use when they’re being bothered or bullied by their peers. If we can teach kids to say, “I feel sad when you call me names,” we can certainly teach them to say, “I’ll play with you when you stop calling me names,” or better yet, to just walk away and choose a more respectful playmate. Instructing kids, “Tell him how it makes you feel,” does them no favor, and often only sets them up for additional conflict and pain.)

Instead of approaching your kids after they’ve tied up the phone night after night with a statement like, “I feel so frustrated when I can’t use the phone,” how about letting them know ahead of time, “I’ll need

to have the phone free between 8:00 and 9:00 tonight” or “You need to wrap up your calls by 8:00 so I can use the phone.” This statement sets clear boundaries without using your feelings to manipulate or control. It may help to get a commitment from your children that shows how they will plan their calls in order to be off the phone in time. You may also need to make tomorrow’s phone privilege contingent upon their cooperation today. All this without relying on your anger, disappointment or frustration to get what you want! (Keep in mind that you’re far less likely to encounter rudeness or resistance when your kids see you working for win-win solutions that attempt to accommodate their needs as well as your own.)

Likewise, using positively-stated contingencies that tell your children, “You can watch TV as soon as your homework is done,” “You can have the car again this weekend as long as you get in tonight by the time we agreed to,” or “I will make dinner as soon as the counters are clean,” simply leaves the outcomes of their choices with them, without requiring their cooperation to keep you from going crazy, being disappointed or getting upset. (You will probably need to clarify your requirements with additional details. For more information in using clear, win-win boundaries, see the following articles: “Unconditional Motivation,” “No-Lose Parenting” and “Following Through.”)

Getting the phone when you want it may simply be a question of asking for it clearly and firmly, and securing an agreement to a plan that works for everyone concerned. Teaching consideration comes much more easily in an environment in which it’s clear that everyone’s needs and preferences are respected and valued. This approach carries far fewer psychological “land mines” than using feelings to get us what we want, and in most cases you’ll have much better luck with a contingency that doesn’t rely on your child’s need for approval or fear of anger or abandonment.

Learning to have and express our feelings without making other people responsible for them is one of the greatest challenges for personal growth, especially for parents and their children, where the boundaries between them can so easily blur. One of the arguments in favor of I-messages is that this formula can help people identify and express their feelings. While I certainly see the advantages of

processing, or working through feelings that come up in our interactions with others (an affective process that is appropriate to being upset about something), I'm not convinced of the need for attaching a specific name to those feelings (a cognitive, analytical process that, at best, is difficult to accomplish when we're upset, and may not always be particularly appropriate, relevant or even necessary to actually working through our feelings).

Nor am I convinced of the importance of letting others know which feelings their behavior has brought up. If you're simply interested in identifying and externalizing your feelings (getting them out), you don't need to involve the other person at all. Because if you're feeling sad, frustrated, embarrassed, disappointed, hurt or whatever because of the way your kids act or look, it's a safe bet that it has far more to do with your own agenda, unfulfilled expectations or sense of adequacy than it does with the kids. Sure there will be time you'll want to work through your feelings with another person. Fine. Go ahead and talk about the reaction you're having to someone's behavior, language or attitudes, but talk about it to someone beside the person whose behavior is triggering (not causing) those feelings! Do you really need to externalize your feelings to your children, or just need to get them out period, perhaps by writing in your journal or talking to a therapist or a trusted friend?

Watch your intent. There are better ways to ask your children for a more desirable behavior than by asking that they change so that you'll feel better. You may need to back up and set better boundaries to anticipate and avoid future problems, or polish up on your follow through, but you can eliminate patterns of manipulation, guilt and self-victimization. The result may just be your children's cooperation, but most important is that both you and your kids can come through with everyone's feelings unscathed.

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