

[Handout # 7] “Soft/Hard/Soft”

Honesty without kindness is not communication. It’s a weapon.

“Soft/Hard/Soft” is a simple tool for talking about hard things in a caring way.

S/H/S operationalizes John Gottman’s “soft start up.” Gottman: *94% of conversations end the way they begin.*

1. Start with something SOFT. Some ways to access “soft”:

Express your caring: “I love you.”

Give positive feedback: “I see that you’re working on getting your kids to pick up.”

“I know that you’ve been trying really hard to be softer with my kids.”

Empathize: “I get that my kids are driving you nuts.” “I know it is so hard to talk to your ex-wife.” “I know your kids aren’t used to picking up like this.”

Attribute positive intentions: “I know in your heart of hearts you want to be caring of me.”

Express confidence: “I do believe we can find a solution that works for both of us.”

2. Now, say the HARD thing, *but say it with that soft energy.*

The very act of looking for “SOFT” can access your caring, open your heart a bit and calm you down a bit. Saying hard things in a loving way makes it *much* easier for the other person to hear.

Tip: “HARD” messages are heard best with “I” messages (I’m struggling”). Avoid “you: messages (“You obviously don’t care.”)

Tip: Offer sentence stems: “*I’d love it if...*” “*It’s hard for me that...*”

3. Then add another SOFT. Some examples (“Soft” is in italics. “Hard” is in non-italics)

Stepparent to parent: “*I see that you’ve been working hard at getting your kids to clean up their stuff.*

I really appreciate it! I wonder if you noticed that John’s hockey gear is all over the living room. I’d love it if you’d ask him to pick it up. *I know this is new for him, and for you.*

[Vs.: “Your kids are complete slob. If you’d ever discipline them, maybe they’d clean up after themselves!”]

Stepdad to stepson: “*I know it’s tough having a stepdad. I bet sometimes you wish I’d just disappear!*

But, since we’re living together, I do think we can be decent to each other. *I know it’s a lot of changes.*”

[Vs: “You are a brat! You WILL treat me with more respect.”]

Parent to stepparent: “*I know my kids drive you crazy sometimes. It has to be hard that we are so much messier than you are.* But I have a request. Would you try to talk to them with more calm and respect? I will keep working on setting more boundaries. *I know it’s not easy for you with them. I love you.*”

[Vs: “You are over-reacting.”]

Divorced parent to ex-spouse: “*I’m sure it would be really fun for Janie to go to a Red Sox game with you on Sunday.* However, you know that is my week-end with her. I know you wouldn’t want me to schedule anything on your time with her. You’ll need to find another time to take her. *I know we both love our kids and want to do fun things with them.*”

[Vs: “I cannot believe you expect Janie to go to a Red Sox game on my time. You always were a self-absorbed bastard.”]