

# teacher tom

TEACHING AND  
LEARNING FROM  
PRESCHOOLERS.

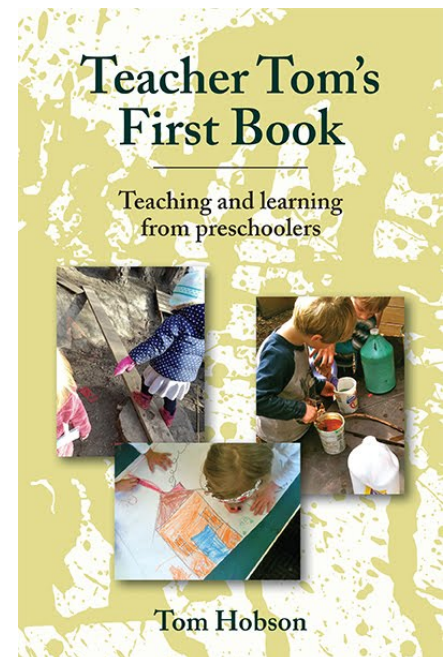
wednesday, december 16, 2015

## The Technology Of How To Treat Human Beings

43

I remember my first formal exposure to the "technology" of [treating children like fully formed human beings](#) -- and I often do think of it as a kind of technology in that it's the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes. I'd previously been exposed to this technology via my daughter's preschool teacher, with whom I'd been working as a [cooperative classroom](#) parent for many months, but, as technology often does for the uninitiated, it just looked like magic, something Teacher Chris was able to do because she was Teacher Chris.

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I was in one of [Tom Drummond's](#) classes at North Seattle College and he began to explain the ultimate **ineffectiveness** of "**directive**" statements. You know the kind, "Sit over here," "Stand there," "Pick that up," the sorts of adult communications with which most of our childhoods were filled. I had a small epiphany as he explained our assignment to us, which was to simply keep track of the number of directive statements we made during our next classroom day. And even as I had the epiphany that this was a part of Teacher Chris' magic trick, I doubted that it could really work, at least not all time, not for all kids, not for all ages. It was good that our assignment was simply about ourselves, about listening to our words, practicing using this new technology, not being burdened with the complications of having to make judgments about how the children were responding, just

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focusing on ourselves and the words we were using.

It felt incredibly awkward, then, replacing my directive statements with informative ones. For instance, instead of saying, "Pick up that block," I would try to make the more cumbersome informative statement, "I see a block on the floor and it's clean up time." One of the basic ideas, Tom explained, was that unlike directive statements which tend to shut things down, informative statements create a space in which the kids get to do their own thinking, make their own decisions about their own behavior, instead of merely engaging in [the power struggle that inevitably emerges from being bossed around](#). It made sense to me even while it felt strange and artificial. It was true, I couldn't help but notice, that when I took the time to be informative, children were far less likely to push back rebelliously, and instead take a beat (which, I've learned means they are taking a moment to process the information you've given them) then pick up that block and put it away.

I discovered, on my own, the truth of Tom's assertion that the ultimate weakness of relying upon directive statements is that, over time, they need to be escalated in intensity. I recall standing in our school's parking lot with a much more experienced parent as she yelled angrily after her kids, "Get your butts over here!" only to have them giggle and scamper away. When she grumbled, "I never thought I'd be the kind of [parent who spanked her kids](#), but I'm almost there," I saw a glimpse of a place I didn't want to go.

And I still had doubts, even as I began to practice with my own preschooler, who soon detected the change in my approach and began to object to it as "teacher talk." I felt a little guilty, like a magician letting the public in on my trick, as I explained to her what I was trying to do. I remember my five-year-old agreeing that it sounded like a good idea. She especially appreciated that I wouldn't be bossing her around, even suggesting she would be happy to help me by pointing out when I slipped up. I thought for sure that I'd ruined everything by letting the cat out of the bag, but if anything, the opposite happened. She became my ally in making "teacher talk" a more natural part of my day-to-day language until I've arrived at a point in my life when parents refer to "Teacher Tom magic."

And still, despite all the evidence, despite all my ever-increasing expertise in using it, I was suspicious that the

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## about teacher tom



**Teacher Tom**  
**Seattle,**  
**Washington,**  
**United States**

I am a preschool teacher, blogger, speaker, artist and the author of [Teacher Tom's First Book \(teachertomsfirstbook.com\)](#) For the past 15 years, I've taught preschool at the Woodland Park Cooperative School. The children come to us as 2-year-olds in diapers and leave as "sophisticated" 5-year-olds ready for kindergarten. The cooperative school model allows me to work very closely with families in a true community setting. I intend to teach at Woodland Park for the rest of my life. I love the kids and I love the families. It's an incredibly rewarding job.

[View my complete profile](#)

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technology of treating children as fully formed human beings would stop working as they got older and more sophisticated.

The father of one of my daughter's classmates was a high school teacher, a good one by all accounts; jovial, casual, humorous. I think I would have liked being in his class. As our kids approached middle school he explained his philosophy of dealing with teens to me: "Oh, I'm their best friend until they cross the line, then *Bam!* I come down like a house of bricks." By this time, I'd become quite confident in the use of my "teacher talk" technology when it came to preschoolers, had seen its effectiveness with my own eyes, had even customized it for my own use, but listening to this guy who everyone admired, I wondered if maybe I was, at least as a parent, going to need to adopt some of this "house of bricks" technique as my own. Well, here I am today, the parent of an adult child, a kid who capably navigated all the regular high school stuff we worry about, and I never felt the need to "come down" like a house of bricks. In fact, just as I did when she was five, I found it much more productive to lay it all out for her as honestly and informatively as possible, revealing my emotions, my dilemma as a parent, my concerns for her safety or her morals or her future or her reputation or whatever. No one makes great decisions all the time, but she's had a lifetime of practice, and most of the time she comes up with perfectly reasonable solutions.

None of this is magic. Like all technology it still works, often even better, when everyone knows *how* it works.

I've now come to a point at which I have complete trust in the technology of treating children like fully formed human beings. Indeed, it's a technology that works on *all* fully formed human beings no matter what their age and it starts with the assumption that [I can never, whatever your age, command you into doing anything](#). My primary responsibility is to speak informatively, and to leave a space in which thinking can take place.

And still people say to me, "You're lucky. You teach privileged children," often insisting that there are some children out there who are so "damaged," who have had so little love or attention or whatever in their lives that they are somehow not ready to be treated as fully formed humans, that they *need* commands and punishment; that they need to learn [obedience](#). I'm left with nothing to say, of course,

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### Living in Dialogue

because they're right in the sense that I teach the children I teach, and without a classroom of older, more damaged kids with whom to experiment, I have nothing but "Sez you!" on which to fall back. Still, I will say that much of the damage probably comes from being either abused or neglected, neither of which will be repaired by being bossed around.

This brings me around to [an old article I want to share with you](#), especially those who doubt this technology, who tend to dismiss it as "namby pamby" or "weenie," even if they are just shadows of words that haunt you when things aren't going well with the fully formed human beings with whom you are interacting. This is a long article about a high school that its principal describes as "the dumping ground," one that was once run by gangs. It's a story about how "punishing misbehavior just doesn't work. You're simply adding trauma to an already traumatized kid." It's the story of how magically this technology is working when applied to poor, disadvantaged, abused, and neglected kids.

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The first time that principal Jim Sporleder tried the New Approach to Student Discipline at Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, WA, he was blown away. Because it worked. In fact, it worked so well that he never when back to the the Old Approach to Student Discipline.


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If you have any doubts, and even if you don't, this is the article to read. There's a lot great information in here; science about how and why the technology works, even on the most "hardened" kids. If you're already a devotee of this technology, it's still worth the time. This is not written to tug at the heartstrings, but it did mine. I found myself tearing up over and over at the epiphanies of teachers and students, at how they had to overcome a lifetime of believing in the myth of "tough love" and "punishment with dignity," at how the "magic trick" is being revealed to the kids themselves making them experts in their own "recovery." It's a story of teachers and children learning to use this technology together to change their lives, one they all say "is just the beginning." It's my story as well.

I put a lot of time and effort into this blog. If you'd like to support me please consider a small contribution to the cause. *Thank you!*

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posted by [teacher tom](#) at 5:48 am 

labels: [parenting](#), [teaching](#)

## 6 comments:

**anonymous said...**

AKA "How Not To Be An Adultist."

9:03 AM

**anonymous said...**

I needed to read this tonight. I will attempt a lot more "Teacher Talk" in the coming days and hope for a better relationship with my son.

12:44 AM



**md abir hasan said...**

Thanks for share a nice post.  
[JSC Result 2015](#)

10:30 AM



**rebecca decoca said...**

This is brilliant, yet simple and true. And it works. Respect children and young adults as human beings, and this is how you do it. I love that you call it a technology: the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes. This is the kind of "technology" we need more of. Human values and cognitive psychology are so much more important for society than gadgets.

11:37 AM

**ana said...**

This post is worth a million dollars!  
I just wished I knew how you sound, Teacher Tom.  
Can you share a link to an audio you've done?

6:21 PM



**teacher tom said...**

Hey Ana, Search for posts with headlines that begin with "Kids in the House . . ." I did some videos with them a few years ago. You'll find the search box on top of the upper right hand column of the blog.

6:47 AM

Someday You'll Understand  
What That Means

When There Is Pain, We  
Swarm

Standing Still

Struggle

"Maybe That's How  
Dinosaurs Got Extinct"

"He Doesn't Listen To Me!"

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We Are Afraid Of  
Freedom...

None Of Us

The Yellowland Experiment  
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"Thank You, Santa"

The Awful Truth

Learning Piles

I'm Hoping You Can Help

"I'm Not Going To Move"

The Truth About Teaching

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