

Reel Appeal: The Spiritual Parent's Movie Companion Discussion Guide #4

Based on Principle #4: Words are Important, Use Them With Care
from "10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting"
by Mimi Doe

and

"The Miracle Worker" (1962)
Play and screenplay by William Gibson, book by Helen Keller (uncredited)

Talking to Your Kids: Becoming a Miracle "Word-er"

Written by Jennifer Marquis & Edited by Mimi Doe

Note: This film is rated G, but some scenes may be overwhelming for small children. As always, we here at SpiritualParenting.com recommend viewing this movie with your child.

"The Miracle Worker" is a wonderful cinematic illustration of the importance of words. Each and every word that Annie teaches Helen brings Helen one step closer to liberation, freedom, and joy. As parents, we must remember that our own words are no less potent; they are, indeed, powerful blessings.

I. Using Words With Care (page 110, "10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting")

Annie: "Now all I have to teach you is one word. Everything."

It's important to teach our kids to treat words reverently and respectfully. Since spoken words are "invisible," it's easy to become careless with them.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Did you know you can imprint your words on someone's heart the very same way Annie imprints them on Helen's hand?**
- **Did you know that mean words can make someone's heart hurt, and kind words can make someone's heart jump...for real?**
- **Why does Annie read so much, especially when it hurts her eyes so badly?**

Be aware of the tone your words are wrapped in. Children hear the anger and impatience beneath our words as clearly as they hear the words themselves.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Before Helen understands words, does she know when Annie is angry with her? When Annie is pleased with her? How?**

Tact and timing are wise, subtle skills best learned from parents. Our children should learn to think before speaking.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Does Helen know what she wants to say before she learns to “speak?”**

II. Ways To Use Words With Care (page 112, “10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting”)

James Keller: “You’d be quite a handsome girl if it wasn’t for your eyes.”

Annie: “You’d be quite a gentleman if it wasn’t for your manners!”

Mimi suggests that we remember and record the compliments our children receive from others as a way to help them value themselves.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Do people ever say nice things about Helen? Who says them?**

Mimi also suggests that we encourage our kids to explore words and language by having them keep journals, write poetry, read, and tell stories.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Why was Annie always squinting into and reading that book of hers?**
- **Do you know what kind of job Helen had when she grew up?**
- **What would have happened if Helen had never written about the things that happened to her as a child?**
- **Would you like to read some other things that Helen Keller wrote?**

III. Words Help Children Recognize Their Potential (page 121, “10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting”)

Annie: “She knows how to spell it. She just doesn’t know she knows!”

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **What would have happened to Helen if Captain Keller hadn’t agreed to hire Annie?**
- **What would have happened to Helen if Annie hadn’t insisted that Helen use good table manners?**
- **What story does Helen’s mom tell about Helen trying to speak as a baby?**

IV. Capture Their Childhoods With Words (page 122, “10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting”)

Annie (signing): “I...love...Helen.”

Mimi encourages us to write about our feelings and experiences with our children. She also suggests that we leave loving letters and notes where our children can find them.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Who is Annie always writing letters to? Who is she writing about? Why does she do this? Do you think it's important?**
- **Did you know that I write about you? Would you like me to read any of it to you?**

V. The Power of Prayerful Words (page 126, "10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting")

Annie: "Imitate now. Understand later!"

Helen's initial understanding of language as a simple "finger game" is a wonderful metaphor for the way our children often understand prayer, at first. They may have to say the words over and over again until, one day, it just clicks in.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **How many times do you think Annie had to spell "water" before Helen understood it? Why do you think she finally got it?**
- **Do you think practicing words is like practicing piano or sports or handwriting...or praying?**

To help combat the difficulties sometimes associated with rote prayer, Mimi also suggests that we write our own parenting prayer or teach our children a beautiful prayer, and that we pray them together as a family.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **If we wrote down all the words that Helen has learned by the end of the movie, what kind of prayer could we make up?**

VI. Take Responsibility for Your Words (page 131, "10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting")

Annie: "Her greatest handicap is your love."

Annie Sullivan is profoundly responsible with words. She says what she means. She speaks honestly, directly, and from the heart.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Does Annie hurt Helen's parents' feelings when she tells them the truth about Helen? Do you think she should have said those things?**

In her work with Helen, Annie knows that no word is unimportant. She realizes that no word should be extraneous, and that she has limited time to teach Helen a great deal of information. In the same way, we should consider our own engagement in negative speech habits, idle gossip, or energy-draining conversations a supreme waste of time, especially in light of the fact that we are our children's role models.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Why doesn't Annie teach Helen harder words than "water" and "teacher?"**

We must correct our children only out of a desire to love and serve them; we should learn to say yes as often as we can without compromising our own limits.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **Does Annie force Helen to have good table manners because she doesn't like Helen?**
- **What does Annie do when Helen spills ink all over Annie's writing table?**

Teach your children not to use words that reflect what they don't want to be; remind them that the words they utter, even casually, often come true. Teach them that they can prophecy things into being, and that they can send telepathic messages, to themselves and others.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **What happened after Annie spelled "water" hundreds of times to Helen?**
- **Do you think spelling "water" over and over again is kind of like an affirmation?**
- **Do you think Annie "made" Helen understand her?**
- **If you call yourself a bad name over and over, do you think that your brain will one day "get it" and make it true?**
- **If you told yourself something nice or happy over and over again, do you think that it might come true, as well? Give me an example!**

It can be helpful to teach our children that words have waves/vibrations/frequencies, and that some words are "stronger" than others.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **When Annie first comes to the house and sits down on the porch, does Helen know she's there? How?**
- **What kind of sound did it make when Annie sat down?**
- **Are words louder or softer than that sound?**

Ultimately, the greatest lesson we can teach our kids is that words have a tremendously powerful influence over their minds.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **At the end of the movie, Helen has learned how to "speak." What will she be able to do now that she couldn't do before?**

Mimi has many wonderful suggestions for using words responsibly. One of them is to substitute a loving gesture for a secret word or phrase known only to you and your children.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **What is Helen’s symbol for “Mama” before she learns how to spell it?**
- **What gesture did Annie use when she was happy with Helen? Show me!**
- **If you don’t want me to say “I love you” out loud, what gesture can I make so you’ll know that’s what I mean?**
- **How would aliens wave goodbye and say hello? Would it be fun to make that our new, secret greeting?**

Remember to include your kids in your conversations and to use inclusive language. There’s a wonderful dinner scene where Helen’s family chats obliviously while Helen circles the table, making a mess and eating off everyone’s plate. This scene is a wonderful example of how we are often unaware of the presence of our children, even when they’re right there with us!

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **At the dinner table, do Helen’s parents and brother know she’s there? Does Annie know she’s there? Why are they different?**

Mimi encourages us to use words that encourage (rather than to praise or label) our kids, and to remember that whatever we praise, we increase.

ASK YOUR KIDS...

- **What kinds of things did Annie say and do for Helen when Helen was good?**
- **Why do you think Helen loved Annie so much?**
- **Do you think Helen was lucky that Annie came into her life?**

VI. Parents’ Insight Building Exercises: For Personal or Group Use

(p.148, “10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting”)

- Go through a day pretending that your children are blind, and that they only know you through your words. Go through another day pretending that you are blind, and that you know your children only by their words. Notice how this changes your interactions with them.
- When your tone becomes angry or impatient, remind yourself that impatience is just a form of arrogance, and ask yourself if what you’re doing in that moment is really more important than what your child is asking of you in that moment.
- When you grow weary of repeating things to your children, or you begin to fear that your children will never learn from your repeated reminders, remember Annie Sullivan’s resolve to repeat each word a million times until the job was done.
- When you feel that your children aren’t listening to you (especially if it’s become a pattern), stop and ask yourself if you’re speaking with awareness or mindlessly “yakking” at them. Notice that when you speak your words with awareness – even simple ones, “Please brush your teeth” – your children will sense it and respond accordingly.

- The next time you recognize your own words or speech patterns in your children, stop and ask yourself what your impressions are, and how you feel. Are you proud of them, or do you feel that some personal adjustments are necessary?
- When you praise or encourage your child, look them in the eye and speak from the heart.
- The next time you find yourself correcting your child, stop and ask what your intention is. Are you trying to teach or exert control? Are your commands grounded in love...or something else?
- Become aware of the things you pray for for your children, especially those things that come up again and again. Try turning those things into a more formal parenting prayer.
- When you're alone, wherever you are, stop and send your child a telepathic love message. Ask them, later, if they felt it.

Parents' Check-in Questions

What words does my child need to hear today?

What words do I need to say to my child today?

Can I say any of these things while they're sleeping tonight?

What words do I need to hear today? What words does my parenting partner need to hear today? How can I make that happen?

What other words are my children hearing that are impacting them today -- on television, on the playground, on the car radio? Am I as aware of these other influences as I am of my own verbal influences?

Have I had even one playful conversation with my child today?

Children's Guided Journey

Pick one of your child's favorite books or stories or poems or journal entries. Ask your child to close his or her eyes while you read it aloud, and ask them to try to "feel" the words in their hearts. Then choose some random words from the text and ask how those words felt on the inside – rough, smooth, sharp, tough, bright? You can share some of your own favorite words and how they make you feel. Say them over and over together until they become delightfully nonsensical!

Affirmations for Parents

The words I speak are imprinted immediately and directly on my child's heart.

I speak with truth and integrity.

I speak with awareness.

I speak with humor and playfulness.

I am a creative linguist!

I honor the gift of language.

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