



## I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs, and Kids When You're All Adults

By Deborah Tannen

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Why does talk in families so often go in circles, leaving us tied up in knots? In this illuminating book, Deborah Tannen, the linguist and bestselling author of **You Just Don't Understand** and many other books, reveals why talking to family members is so often painful and problematic even when we're all adults. Searching for signs of acceptance and belonging, we find signs of disapproval and rejection. Why do the seeds of family love so often yield a harvest of criticism and judgment? In **I Only Say This Because I Love You**, Tannen shows how important it is, in family talk, to learn to separate word meanings, or messages, from heart meanings, or metamessages — unstated but powerful meanings that come from the history of our relationships and the way things are said. Presenting real conversations from people's lives, Tannen reveals what is actually going on in family talk, including how family conversations must balance the longing for connection with the desire for control, as we struggle to be close without giving up our freedom.

This eye-opening book explains why grown women so often feel criticized by their mothers; and why mothers feel they can't open their mouths around their grown daughters; why growing up male or female, or as an older or younger sibling, results in different experiences of family that persist throughout our lives; and much, much more. By helping us to understand and redefine family talk, Tannen provides the tools to improve relationships with family members of every age.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

"Everything we say to each other echoes with meanings left over from our past experience--both our history talking to the person before us at this moment and our history talking to others," says Deborah Tannen, one of the world's most famous linguists. We react not only to the message, but to the "metamessage": our interpretation of the unstated meaning, based on tone, relationship, and our past associations. Add in the connections and control issues among family members, and it's no wonder families have so much trouble understanding each other!

*I Only Say This Because I Love You* is aimed mostly at adult family interactions. Professor Deborah Tannen, the popular author of *You Just Don't Understand*, uses anecdotes filled with dialogues to illustrate why we hear criticism when the other person meant to convey caring, how family members create alignments with secrets and broken confidences, the dynamics of arguments, the power of apologies, gender patterns in family talk, and communication with teens. You're bound to recognize your family members--and yourself!--in Tannen's examples.

You won't find quick, easy answers for improving communication in your family, but you will discover another dimension of understanding what's really going on. Now if you could just get your mother to read the book! --Joan Price

#### From Publishers Weekly

Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* set tongues wagging across the country in the early 1990s with its analysis of gender differences in speaking styles. Now the linguist and author of numerous other books turns her attention to patterns of speech within families. Though the subject is not as sexy as in her mega-bestseller, most readers are apt to hear themselves in these pages. For example, Tannen asserts, in many situations the mother serves as "Communications Chief" as well as chief critic. Drawing on sample conversations from an ongoing study at Georgetown University, from memoirs and from TV documentaries (including *An American Family*, which examined the Loud family of Santa Barbara in 1973 and reveals how little family interactions have changed in the past 30 years), she convincingly shows how threads of family history and emotion add weight and complexity to everyday exchanges. Each conversation, she argues, carries meaning both in its actual words and in the underlying relationship and attitudes it expresses (e.g., "I didn't criticize you. I just asked a question"). She also shows how speakers may use language for connection and control, influencing shifts in family alignment. Like its predecessor, this book is neither scholarly nor overtly self-help-oriented. Its advice is embedded in its examples, though occasionally Tannen offers explicit guidelines, such as rules for fair fighting: stick to the facts; avoid insults, sarcasm and exaggeration. Parents of teenagers may also find some good insights in Tannen's clear-sighted analysis of how clashing frames of reference undermine communication. Agent, Suzanne Gluck; first serial to *Good Housekeeping* and *Modern Maturity*. (May 10)Forecast: Tannen's 13-city author tour (including a May 14 appearance on the *Today Show*) will help ensure this book's visibility, but it's more likely to match the respectable (but not stellar) numbers for *Talking 9 to 5*, her book on workplace speaking styles, than those for *You Just Don't Understand*.

From Library Journal

The author of 17 books (e.g., *That's Not What I Meant!*, *You Just Don't Understand*), Tannen (linguistics, Georgetown) returns to her first love, "the language of everyday conversation" among family members, using transcripts, anecdotes, and literary examples. With lively prose and genuine concern for people, Tannen brings linguistic concepts metamessage, re-framing, indirect request to bear on dozens of situations to help lay readers strengthen family ties. Her audience needs to realize that she blurs lines between linguistic science and art; she is also a poet, translator, and playwright, and she frequently dips into social sciences and philosophy. Discussions of connection and control, apology, and talking with teens draw on psychology more than linguistics, and Tannen's judgments are sometimes partial, in both senses of the word, and open to dispute. This is nevertheless a fine stimulant to conversation, constructive argument, and research. Essential for larger public and academic libraries, along with Suzette Haden Elgin's works (e.g., *The Last Word on the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense*, 1987). E. James Lieberman, George Washington Univ. Sch. of Medicine, Washington, DC  
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