

## **Speak From the Heart** by Daniel Yeager, LCSW, RPT-S

Appreciation is the highest form of prayer, for it acknowledges the presence of good wherever you shine the light of your thankful thoughts.

- *Alan Cohen*

**Rationale:** The children that we see in therapy sometimes have difficulty recognizing their own goodness and appreciating their own value as members of the groups to which they belong (family, school, friends, etc.) Likewise, they may not typically stop to think about the goodness of others and the contributions that others make to those same groups. Finally, they may lack experience or comfort in expressing appreciation to other people in those groups. Yet research shows that expressing appreciation improves relationship satisfaction (for both the recipient of appreciation and the person expressing the appreciation) and intensifies the feeling of being connected.

**Goal:** The purpose of this activity is to give children the opportunity to practice appreciating and acknowledging their own goodness and the goodness of others.

**Age Range:** 5 and up

**Application:**

- This activity can be used with individuals, groups, families, sibling pairs.
- This is a fun activity that can be incorporated into, and add valuable experiences to, any method of treatment from child-centered therapy to cognitive-behavioral therapy.
- It can easily be adapted to a variety of settings: offices, agencies, schools, and hospitals. Once learned, it can be assigned to families as a “home activity.”

**Materials needed:** One or more heart-shaped items. This could be a heart drawn on a piece of paper, a heart cut from a Valentine card, a bean bag shaped heart, a stress ball heart, etc. I have been doing this for a number of years and I have a heart-shaped box with a collection of hearts. I allow the children to choose the heart that they want to use for the activity. It is very interesting to see which heart the child selects. For example, I have two “broken hearts” (a cracked stress ball heart and a stuffed purple heart that is torn and has lost some of its stuffing.) It is quite amazing to me how often these two hearts are chosen. I think there is great value in giving the child a way to tell me, without the need for words, that his or her heart is in need of healing.



### **Introduction:**

Years ago, I was leading a social skills group for five children, ages 10-11. On one rainy Thursday afternoon, we had come to the end of our planned activities, there was still 15 minutes left in the session, and the children were beginning to get a little rowdy. So, thinking on my feet, I asked, "Would you like to play a game?" "Yes!" was the immediate response. I quickly drew a heart on a piece of paper, wrote the words "Speak from the Heart," asked the children to close their eyes, and hid the heart underneath a chair cushion. I then told the children to open their eyes and look around the play room for the heart.

Eventually Henry found the heart. I rolled a desk chair to the center of the room and asked him to sit in the "compliment chair" while the other children and I gathered around him in a semi-circle. I asked him to begin by giving himself a compliment. He cheerfully complimented himself on his soccer skills. I then told him that the next part of being the person in the compliment chair was to give one compliment to each of the other group members. Although this was a fairly cohesive group that had been meeting for a long time, Henry initially had some difficulty giving a "true" compliment. His first response was to look around the circle at each person's feet saying "Nice shoes, Nice shoes, Nice shoes, Nice shoes," to the other four children. This led to a discussion about what a compliment is (see **What to do if...** below).

Eventually, Henry extended heart-felt compliments all around to the other four children in the group. I then told Henry that it was his turn to hide the heart. We continued the activity until each child in the group had a turn to find the heart and to sit in the compliment chair. Hence the "Speak from the Heart" game was born. I have done this activity with young children as well as with adolescents. I have used it in individual sessions, as well as with families, with sibling pairs and with groups. I must add that this is one of **the** favorite activities of the children and families that I work with; it is often the activity that children choose during the time allotted for "free play" during the therapy hour.

### **How to Play (general):**

Whether playing one-on-one with a child or with a group of people, this activity has two parts. In the first part of the game, the player expresses appreciation for himself or herself. In the second part of the game, the player expresses appreciation for other people in his or her life.

### **How to Play (one-on-one with a child):**

Tell the child that you are going to play a game called "Speak from the Heart." If you have a selection of hearts, allow the child to choose the heart to be used in the game.

Once the heart has been selected, instruct the child to close his or her eyes (or turn away), while you hide the heart in the office or play room. If this is the first time that the child has played this game or if the child is very young, hide the heart so that it can be easily found. (In this activity, you want to spend most of the time expressing appreciation, not looking for the heart.) An older child may like the challenge of making the search more difficult and sometimes I will even ask the child, "Do you want me to hide it easy, medium or hard?" You can add some fun (and speed up the process of locating the heart) by offering clues. If they are getting close, I might say, "You are warm" and "You are getting warmer." If they are really close I say something like,

“You are as hot as a crawfish boiling in the pot!” (a local food reference here in South Louisiana!) If they are moving away from the heart, I might say “You are cold” or “You are getting colder.” If they are very far away, I might say, “You are so cold you could be living with the polar bears!”

Once the heart is found, have the child sit in a designated “Compliment Chair” and announce that it is time to “speak from the heart.” Explain that this means that the child will describe some good things about himself. Some children may need help with this (see **What to do if...** below.) After talking about the child, announce that it is now time to tell some good things about other people. If the child has difficulty with this, I suggest that the child can give me a compliment and/or tell me some good things about a parent, a teacher, a friend, etc. Another alternative is to use the *Express Your Appreciation* cards on the last page of these instructions. (Have the child choose three cards to answer.)

Often the child will want to play this game again at the next session. I encourage the child to find different things to appreciate next time, both about himself and others, as well as to add other people to his list.

After playing the game one-on-one, I often suggest that the child help me teach the game to some other members of the family, perhaps a sibling who has come along to the appointment or a parent, or all members of the family who happen to be there that day.

### **How to Play (with more than one person):**

The activity proceeds in the same way as when playing on-on-one, with the difference that, for the second part of the activity, the person in the chair expresses appreciation directly to the other players. After the first person finishes both parts of the activity, that person hides the heart and another round begins. This should continue until all person in the group have a turn. You may want to specify that people who have already had a turn do not search for the heart; instead you might have them help to give the clues about how cold or warm the searcher is.

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### **What to do if...**

#### ***1. Players can't think of anything good about themselves?***

Some children, and some parents as well, are not used to saying something good about themselves. If they are stumped, I may ask, “Do you want me to help you?” and then make some observations about positive things I have learned about that person. Even with help, it is important for the person to agree with those observations and to actually say the words aloud, to “speak from the heart.”

#### ***2. Players can't think of anything good about one of the other players?***

Some players may not be skilled at giving compliments to others. In fact, disrespect towards parents (as well as disrespect toward children) may be one of the problems that brought the family into therapy. If playing with a group of

children, or with a family, you don't want to create a situation in which the player is giving compliments to some members of the group and then stops and declares that he cannot think of anything good about one particular person. To avoid this, emphasize that the compliment chair is a place for sitting and thinking; ask that each player take some time in the chair to call to mind the good things about each person in the group. Specify that they should have a compliment in mind for each player *before* they begin to speak from the heart; get a confirmation that they have done so and offer help if needed.

### **3. *Players offer compliments with a “dig” at the end?***

Some people are uncomfortable offering a compliment and leaving it at that; after giving a compliment, they then counteract it with a joke or a negative comment. With some groups of children I head this off by asking “When is a compliment not a compliment?” I then give an example, using myself: “Suppose someone said to me, “That’s a nice tie you have, Danny; it’s about time you started dressing better.” We then talk about what it feels like to get a “pure” compliment versus getting a “mixed” compliment.

### **4. *Players offer compliments to others that are insincere or shallow?***

To express appreciation in a meaningful way, a person needs to actually **feel** grateful, and that means taking the time to really reflect on the contributions that each person makes to the whole. Thus, some clients may need practice not so much in **expressing** appreciation but in looking deeper, recognizing the value of each member of the group, including themselves. To introduce this concept, you may want to begin by using the *Express Your Appreciation* cards included on the last page of these instructions. Have the group members take turns drawing a card and answering the questions. After a couple of rounds, have a brief discussion about the importance of being appreciated, then begin the Speak from the Heart activity.

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The **Speak from the Heart** activity can be a springboard to talk about all kinds of issues: self-esteem, gratitude, and the importance of being treated with respect. In combination with other therapeutic activities, it can facilitate building relationships and/or in helping to mend a fractured relationship.

Note: The *Express Your Appreciation* questions on the next page can be copied on heavy paper and cut into cards. A few blank cards are included for the therapist to create their own custom cards. Another idea is, after playing the game with a child or a group, to ask your clients to think of some questions to include in the game and write those on the blank cards.

<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>What do your parents (or grandparents) appreciate about you? How do they show their appreciation?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about someone who makes you laugh. What do you like about that?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Who would you want to be with if you had a problem and needed some advice? Why?</p>
<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>What are three things you would like your teacher (or your boss) to tell others about you?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about a time that you felt grateful to a stranger.</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Who helps you to do the right thing? Explain.</p>
<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about a compliment (or a reward or an honor) you received that meant a lot to you.</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about a family member who did something really nice for you.</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about someone who really worked hard at something. Pretend you could give that person a gift to show your appreciation. What would you give?</p>
<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Who is someone that you find very relaxing to be around? Explain.</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Who knows how to help you when you are feeling down and need some encouragement?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Who is someone that you could trust with an important secret? Explain how you know that person is trustworthy.</p>
<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about a favorite family custom or ritual that you look forward to on birthdays or holidays.</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about a teacher that you liked a lot. What did that teacher do to be a good teacher?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Pretend you are going to send a thank you note to someone who has been an important person in your life. To whom would you sent it? Why?</p>

<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Would the world be a different kind of place if people gave lots more compliments and lots less criticism? Explain</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell who you like to be with when you want to have fun. Why?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about someone who is like a hero to you.</p>
<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about a time that someone did something really nice for you.</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Pretend you could give an award to someone. What would it be for and to whom would you give it?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Tell about a time someone did something that took courage.</p>
<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>From whom would you like to receive praise or a compliment? Why?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Who would you like to have with you if you were in trouble? Why?</p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p> <p>Who has been the kindest person in your life this week? Explain.</p>
<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p>	<p><i>Express Your Appreciation!</i></p>
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