



Commentary Transcript: *Big Little Lies*

Clip 1: Season 1, Episode 1

In this scene, Madeline Mackenzie is driving her youngest daughter, Chloe, to school on the first day of First Grade.

Let's watch the scene.

[PLAY SCENE]

Simple enough scene, right? Did you notice that Madeline and Chloe's communication could have been more connected? Did you see the opportunities that Madeline missed?

Overall, we could look at Madeline's approach in this scene as "counterfeit" support of Chloe. Madeline is more focused on her perspective than Chloe's, likely because (like all parents) if her kid feels OK, Madeline can feel OK too. But she's not asking Chloe anything; she's just talking at her. And Chloe clearly feels it—and has gotten used to Mom's style.

Let's break this down.

PAUSE: "Your sister loved going there and so will you."

Two things happen in quick succession here. First, "You have nothing to be nervous about." Madeline is telling Chloe how to feel and, what she's saying isn't actually true. Chloe has plenty to be nervous about, even if her mom wants to ignore it.

That kind of directive approach to emotion management makes it unlikely that Chloe will correct Madeline with an adult-level statement like, "Yeah, I do feel nervous and that's a normal feeling on the first day of school."

Telling Chloe not to be nervous also sets up their dynamic to make it more likely that Chloe won't bother trying to tell Mom how she really feels—not just in this situation, but in every situation that follows. Chloe knows that Mom isn't interested enough to ask how she feels. Mom tells her how to feel—and kids are supposed to do what their parents tell them, without talking back.

A simple and more connective line might be, "Are you feeling nervous?"

The second thing that happens here, "Your sister loved going there and so will you." Again, Madeline is telling Chloe how she should feel but also adding an element of comparison to the mix. Chloe is not her sister. Mom is not recognizing that Chloe might feel differently than her sister.



So, if Chloe didn't enjoy the school, would she be likely to speak up, or might she think that "because her sister liked it," Chloe has to pretend that she likes it, even if she doesn't? And what about if Chloe has issues at school? Will she be likely to raise those issues if she thinks the response will be, "Well, your sister thought it was great"? It's tough to tell, but saying, "Your sister loved going there and so will you" doesn't land the same way as something like, "Your sister loved a lot of things about going to this school and I hope you will too!"

PAUSE: "In fact, you should be excited."

This is more of Mom trying to influence Chloe's feelings, this time with her own excitement. It's more counterfeit connection. She's not expressing curiosity about how Chloe does feel. Like the line about being nervous, saying, "You should be excited" is not the same thing as, "Are you excited?"

PAUSE: "Do you know why...?"

Just a quick aside here. The look on Chloe's face when she realizes what's coming is priceless — she already knows she's not being engaged genuinely about her feelings, and she's heard this one before.

PAUSE: "This is the very first day of the rest of your life."

So, when Mom started the sentence, we saw Chloe getting ready to blow off what was coming next, even though Madeline thinks it's a gem. It's another miss on Mom's part. That future-focused mantra doesn't land the same for a kid as something like, "Because you're strong, smart, and you're learning every day!"

PAUSE: "Okay, woman."

Here is the final evidence that Mom missed opportunities to connect. Chloe is responding to the counterfeit support with her own lack of engagement. Chloe has not benefitted from any of the words Mom has thrown into the back seat, and this conversation has not brought them closer.

PAUSE: "I am not 100% sure about that tone, young lady."

This is a great continuation of the focus on Mom. She's missed opportunities to connect with Chloe, which Chloe confirms with her lack of enthusiasm, "OK, Woman," which is basically saying, "Fine, whatever." But Madeline questioning the appropriateness of Chloe's response shows that she has missed the opportunity presented by Chloe's lack of enthusiasm. She's nearly chastising the response when that response is the clearest indication in this sequence that Mom has missed what's really happening. Chloe has noticed it.

Saying, "I am not 100% sure about that tone, young lady" is different than, "Oh, there's me with that saying again! I know it seems silly, but the reason I say it is because today is a day that matters! I hope you can be your brightest self and really enjoy your first day!"



So we've seen that there were some missed opportunities for understanding and connection, but we're cool with that because this is entertainment.

If this were real life, a more connective sequence might sound different. I'll start the revised dialogue with Madeline and I won't bother trying to do different voices...

Madeline: Hey, remember how we talked about how more than one feeling can happen at a time?

Chloe: Yeah.

Madeline: Well, this seems like it could be one of those times. Are you feeling nervous about your first day, and kind of excited, too?

Chloe: Yeah, I am feeling... (thinks to self, choosing words)... nervous and excited, but I have butterflies, so I think I'm a little scared, too.

Madeline: Do you know what feels scary? Is it something specific or the whole thing?

Chloe: The whole thing, I think. I don't know what it'll be like, and I want the other kids to like me.

Madeline: That makes sense. So, is that part of why you're excited, too? Because you're looking forward to making new friends?

Chloe: Yeah, that is exciting 'cause it'd be fun to meet people I can listen to music or hang out at the beach with.

Madeline: Can you think of anything you can do to help things work out the way you want them to?

Chloe: Well, I guess I can try to be friendly and try not to get upset if no one wants to play with me right away.

Madeline: Those sound like great ideas! I can't wait to hear all about how you do today. You know why? Because you're strong, you're smart, and you're learning every day!

Even if Chloe were to roll her eyes at that mantra, it's an age-appropriate message that focuses on what kids care most about—today.



A few thoughts about this exploration...

One of the best gifts we can give other humans is the space to figure out what we feel and voice it in a satisfying way. That starts with actually caring what someone thinks, feels, or wants.

If Chloe was being asked how she felt, she'd be laying down different synaptic pathways that tell her, "It's common for Mom to ask me how I feel. But how do I feel?" That would give Chloe practice in identifying and expressing those feelings while expecting them to be welcomed and taken seriously.

There are a few other simple ways Madeline could have expressed curiosity about Chloe's experience...

She could ask...

- Do you have any concerns or fears about today?
- What are you most excited for?
- Is there anything you're hoping will happen today? What might you do to help it to happen?
- Is there anything you're hoping won't happen today? And how do you think you can help prevent it?

Telling someone how they should feel is the opposite of curiosity, but curiosity is what helps to open the door to connection. Connective communication is not about dispelling someone's unspoken fears by telling them to "feel good" or "feel excited." It's about allowing the other person to voice their perspective and discuss the feelings they do have. From there, you might be able to highlight their strengths and knowledge, and brainstorm about how they can meet their needs in a skillful way.

Even little kids know that emotions and behaviors interact. Parents can set the stage for healthier development by purposely giving kids the chance to practice considering and reporting on their moods, fears, and hopes—and identifying the behaviors that will most likely get them what they want. These abilities are the basis of self-awareness and self-management—and they help to set the stage for a smoother developmental trajectory.

We're all learning as we go, and there is no perfect way to think, feel, be, or communicate. The lesson here is that asking questions is a great way to show that we care about someone's experience. For kids, a small effort toward asking instead of telling can pay off big in brain development and self-knowledge. And, no matter our age, all of us tend to feel cared for when someone expresses interest in our perspective, feelings, wants, and needs. It's a small thing that can feel really big.



Cultivate
LifeLab

me talk good

Here are a few questions you're invited to consider related to these topics...

- When someone tells you, "Cheer up" or "You should feel..." do you resent it a little?
- Does it feel good when someone shows genuine interest in how you feel, asks questions about your experience, and gives you the space to answer?
- Do you tend to tell your kids or other people how to feel? Why? Is it easier than asking, listening, and taking the time to understand?

OK, that's the end of this exploration of asking instead of telling and making the most of opportunities to connect with what's real for someone else. I hope you found a few useful tidbits that you can apply in your own life.