



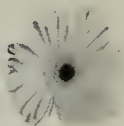
In Persuasion Nation

Stories

George Saunders



I CAN SPEAK!™

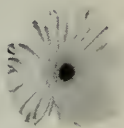


Mrs. Ruth Faniglia
210 Lester Way
Rochester, NY 14623

Dear Mrs. Faniglia,

We were very sorry to receive your letter of 23 Feb., which accompanied the I CAN SPEAK!™ you returned, much to our disappointment. We here at KidLuv believe that the I CAN SPEAK!™ is an innovative and essential educational tool that, used with proper parental guidance, offers a rare early-development opportunity for babies and toddlers alike. And so I thought I would take some of my personal time (I am on lunch) and try to address the questions you raised in your letter, which is here in front of me on my (cluttered!) desk.

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First, may I be so bold as to suggest that some of your disappointment may stem from your own, perhaps unreasonable, expectations? Because in your letter, what you indicated, when I read it? Was that you think and/or thought that somehow the product can read your baby's mind? Our product cannot read your baby's mind, Mrs. Faniglia. No one can read a baby's mind. At least not yet. Although we are probably working on it! What the I CAN SPEAK!TM can do, however, is recognize *familiar aural patterns* and respond to these patterns in a way that makes *baby seem older*. Say baby sees a peach. If you or Mr. Faniglia (I hope I do not presume) were to loudly say something like: "What a delicious peach!" the I CAN SPEAK!TM, hearing this, through that hole, that little slotted hole near the neck, might respond by saying something like: "I LIKE PEACH." Or: "I WANT PEACH." Or, if you had chosen the ICS2000 (which you did not, you chose the ICS1900, which is fine, perfectly good for most babies) the I CAN SPEAK!TM might even respond by saying something like: "FRUIT, ISN'T THAT ONE OF THE MAJOR FOOD GROUPS?"

Which would be pretty good for a six-month-old, don't you think, which my Warranty Response Card shows is the age of your son Derek, Derek Faniglia?

But here I must reiterate: That would not in reality be Derek speaking. Derek would not in reality know that a peach is fruit, or that fruit is a major food group. The I CAN SPEAK!TM knows it, however, and, from its position on Derek's face, gives the illusion that Derek knows it, by giving the illusion that Derek is speaking out of its twin moving SimuLipsTM. But that is it. That is all we claim.

Furthermore, in your letter, Mrs. Faniglia, you state that the I CAN SPEAK!TM “mask” (your terminology) takes on a “stressed-out look when talking that is not what a real baby’s talking face appears like but is more like some nervous middle-aged woman.” Well, maybe that is so, but with all due respect (and I say this with affection), you try it! You try making a latex face look and talk and move like the real face of an actual live baby! Inside are *over 5,000 separate circuits* and *390 moving parts*. And as far as looking like a middle-aged woman, we beg to differ. We do not feel that a middle-aged stressed-out woman has (1) no hair on head and (2) chubby cheeks and (3) fine downy facial hair. The ICS1900 unit is definitely the face of a baby, Mrs. Faniglia, we took over 2,500 photos of different babies and, using a computer, combined them to make this face on your unit, and on everybody else’s unit, the face we call Male Composite 37 or, affectionately, “Little Roger.” But what you possibly seem to be unhappy about is the fact that Little Roger’s face is not Derek’s face? To be frank, Mrs. Faniglia, many of you, our customers, have found it disconcerting that their baby looks different with the I CAN SPEAK!TM on, than with the I CAN SPEAK!TM off. Which we find so surprising. Did you not, we often wonder, look at the cover of the box? The ICS1900 is very plainly shown, situated on a sort of rack, looking facewise like Little Roger, albeit Little Roger is a bit crumpled and has a forehead furrow of sorts.

Which is why we came up with the ICS2100. With the ICS2100, your baby *looks just like your baby*. And because we do not want anyone to be unhappy with us, we would like to make you the gift of a complimentary ICS2100 upgrade! We

would like to come to your house on Lester Way and make a personalized plaster cast of Derek's real, actual face! And soon, via FedEx, here will come Derek's face in a box, and when you slip that ICS2100 over Derek's head and Velcro the Velcro, he will look nearly exactly like himself, plus we have another free surprise, which is that, while at your house, we will tape his actual voice and use it to make our phrases, the phrases Derek will subsequently say. So not only will he look like himself, he will *sound like himself*, as he crawls around your home, appearing to speak!

Plus we will throw in several personalizing options.

Say you call Derek "Lovemeister." (I am using this example from my own personal home, as my wife Ann and I call our son Billy "Lovemeister," because he is so sweet.) With the ICS2100, you might choose to have Derek say—or appear to say—upon crawling into a room, "HERE COMES THE LOVE- MEISTER!" or "STOP TALKING DIRTY, THE LOVEMEISTER HAS ARRIVED!" How we do this is, laser beams coming out of the earlobes, which sense the doorframe! From its position on the head of Derek, the I CAN SPEAK!™ knows it has just entered a room! And also you will have over one hundred Discretionary Phrases to more highly personalize Derek. You might choose to have Derek say, on his birthday, for example, "MOMMY AND DADDY, REMEMBER THAT TIME YOU CONCEIVED ME IN ARUBA?" (Although probably you did not in fact conceive Derek in Aruba. That we do not know. Our research is not that extensive.) Or say your dog comes up and gives Derek a lick? You might make Derek say (if your dog's name is Queenie, which our dog's name is Queenie): "QUEENIE, GIVE IT A REST!"

Which, you know what? *Makes you love him more.* Because suddenly he is articulate. Suddenly he is not just sitting there going glub glub glub while examining a piece of his own feces on his own thumb, which is something we recently found our Billy doing. Sometimes we have felt that our childless friends think badly of us for having a kid who just goes glub glub glub in the corner while looking at his feces on his thumb. But now when childless friends are over, what we have found, Ann and I, is that there is something great about having your kid say something witty and self-possessed years before he or she would actually in reality be able to say something witty or self-possessed. The bottom line is, it's just *fun*, when you and your childless friends are playing cards, and your baby suddenly blurts out (in his *very own probable future voice*): "IT IS VERY POSSIBLE THAT WE STILL DON'T FULLY UNDERSTAND THE IMPORT OF ALL OF EINSTEIN'S FINDINGS!"

Here I must admit that we have several times seen a sort of softening in the eyes of our resolute childless friends, as if they too would suddenly like to have a baby.

And as far as what you said, about Derek sort of flinching whenever that voice issues forth from him? When that speaker near his mouth sort of buzzes his lips? May I say this is not unusual? What I suggest? Try putting the ICS on Derek for a short time at first, maybe ten minutes a day, then gradually building up his Wearing Time. That is what we did. And it worked super. Now Billy wears his even while sleeping. In fact, if we forget to put it back on after his bath, he pitches a fit. Sort of begs for it! He starts to say, you know, "Mak! Mak!" (Which we think is his word for mask.) And when we put the

mask on and Velcro the Velcro, he says—or it says rather, the ICS2100 says—“GUTEN MORGEN, PAPA!” because we have installed the German Learning module. Or, for example, if his pants are not yet on, he’ll say: “HOW ABOUT SLAPPING ON MY ROMPERS SO I CAN GET ON WITH MY DAY!” (I wrote that one, having done a little stand-up in my younger days.)

My point is, with the ICS2100, Billy is much, much cleverer than he ever was with the ICS1900. He has recently learned, for example, that if he dribbles a little milk out his mouth, down his chin, his SimuLips™ will issue a MOO sound. Which he really seems to get a kick out of! I’ll be in the living room doing a little evening paperwork and from the kitchen I’ll hear, you know, “MOO! MOO! MOO!” And I’ll rush in, and there’ll be this sort of lake of milk on the floor. And there’ll be Billy, dribbling milk down his chin, until I yank the cup away, at which time he bellows: “DON’T FENCE ME IN!” (Ann’s contribution—she was raised in Wyoming.)

Mrs. Faniglia, I, for one, do not believe that any baby wants to sit around all day going glub glub glub. My feeling is that a baby, sitting in its diaper, looking around at the world, thinks to itself, albeit in some crude nonverbal way: What the heck is wrong with me, why am I the only one saying glub glub glub while all these other folks are talking in whole complete sentences? And hence, possibly, lifelong psychological damage may result. Now, am I saying that your Derek runs the risk of feeling bad about himself as a grown-up because as a baby he felt he didn’t know how to talk very good? It is not for me to say, Mrs. Faniglia, I am only in Sales. But I will say I am certainly not taking any chances with our Billy. My⁷ belief is that when

Billy hears a competent, intelligent voice issuing from the area near his mouth, that makes him feel excellent about himself. And it makes me feel excellent about him. Not that I didn't feel excellent about him before. But now we can actually have a sort of conversation! And also—and most importantly—when that voice issues from his SimuLips™, he learns something invaluable, namely that, when he finally does begin speaking, he should *plan on speaking via using his mouth*.

Now, Mrs. Faniglia, you may be thinking: Hold on a sec, of course this guy loves his I CAN SPEAK!™, he probably got his for free. But no, Mrs. Faniglia, I got mine for two grand, just like you. We get no discounts, so much in demand is the I CAN SPEAK!™, and in addition, our management strongly encourages us—in fact you might say they even sort of *require* us—to purchase and use the I CAN SPEAK!™ at home, on our own kids. (Or even, in one case, the case of a Product Service Representative who has no kids, on his elderly senile mom! And although, yes, she looks sort of funny with that Little Roger face on her frail stooped frame, the family has really enjoyed hearing all the witty things she has to say, so much like her old self!) Not that I wouldn't use it otherwise. Believe me, I would. Since we upgraded to the ICS2100, things have been great, Billy says such wonderful things, while looking almost identical to himself, and is not nearly so, you know, boring as when we just had the ICS1900, which (frankly) says some rather predictable things, which I expect is partly why you were unhappy with it, Mrs. Faniglia, you seem like a very intelligent woman. When people come over now, sometimes we just gather around Billy and wait for his

next howler, and just last weekend my supervisor, Mr. Ted Ames, stopped by (a super guy, he has really given me support, please let him know if you've found this letter at all helpful) and boy did we all crack up laughing, and did Mr. Ames ever start scribbling approving notes in his little green notebook, when Billy began rubbing his face very rapidly across the carpet, in order to make his ICS2100 shout: "FRICTION IS A COMMON AND USEFUL SOURCE OF HEAT!"

Mrs. Faniglia, it is nearing the end of my lunch, and I must wrap this up, but I hope I have been of service. On a personal note, I did not have the greatest of pasts when I came here, having been in a few scrapes and even rehab situations, but now, wow, the commissions roll in, and I have made a nice life for me and Ann and Billy. Not that the possible loss of my commission is the reason for my concern. Please do not think so. While it is true that, if you decline my upgrade offer and persist in your desire to return your ICS1900, my commission must be refunded, by me, to Mr. Ames, that is no big deal, I have certainly refunded commissions to Mr. Ames before, especially lately. I don't quite know what I'm doing wrong. But that is not your concern, Mrs. Faniglia. Your concern is Derek. My real reason for writing this letter, on my lunch break, is that, hard as we all work at KidLuv to provide innovative and essential development tools for families like yours, Mrs. Faniglia, it is always sort of a heartbreak when our products are misapprehended. Please do accept our offer of a free ICS2100 upgrade. We at KidLuv really love what kids are, Mrs. Faniglia, which is why we want them to become something better as soon as possible. Baby's early years are so precious, and

must not be wasted, as we are finding out, as our Billy grows and grows, learning new skills every day.

Sincerely yours,

Rick Sminks

Product Service Representative

KidLuv Inc.