

PARENT/CHILD COMMUNICATION



Communication is the sending of information from one person to another. Communication can be verbal, for example, one person talking to another, or it can be non-verbal, for example, a scowl on a person's face that will probably let other people know he is angry. Communication can be positive or negative, effective or ineffective.

It is very important for parents to be able to communicate openly and effectively with their children. Open, effective communication benefits not only the children, but every member of the family. Relationships between parents and their children are greatly improved when there is effective communication taking place. In general, if communication between parents and their children is good, then their relationships are good as well.

Children learn how to communicate by watching their parents. If parents communicate openly and effectively, chances are that their children will, too. Good communication skills will benefit children for their entire lives. Children begin to form ideas and beliefs about themselves based on how their parents communicate with them. When parents communicate effectively with their children, they are showing them respect. Children then begin to feel that they are heard and understood by their parents, which is a boost to self-esteem. On the other hand, communication between parents and children that is ineffective or negative can lead children to believe that they are unimportant, unheard, or misunderstood. Such children may also come to see their parents as unhelpful and untrustworthy.

Parents who communicate effectively with their children are more likely to have children who are willing to do what they are told. Such children know what to expect from their parents, and once children know what is expected of them, they are more likely to live up to these expectations. They are also more likely to feel secure in their position in the family, and are thus more likely to be cooperative.

Ways To Communicate Positively With Children

***Start communicating effectively while children are young.** Before parents and their children can communicate, both must feel comfortable enough to do so. While their children are very young, parents should begin setting the stage for open, effective communication. Parents can do this by making themselves available to their children when they have questions or just want to talk. Furthermore, parents who provide their children with plenty of love, understanding and acceptance are helping to create a climate for open communication. Children who feel loved and accepted by their parents are more likely to open up and share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns with their parents.

Sometimes it's easier for parents to feel acceptance for their children than it is to actually show it. Parents must demonstrate to their children that they love and accept them. Parents can do this in both verbal and nonverbal ways. Verbally parents can let their children know they accept them through what they say. Parents should try to send positive messages to their children. For example, when a child picks up his toys after he or she is finished with them, parents can let him or her know that they appreciate it by saying something like, "I

appreciate it when you pick up your toys without being told." When talking with their children, parents should be careful of what they say and how they say it. Everything parents say to their children sends a message about how they feel about them. For example, if a parent says something like "Don't bother me now. I'm busy," their children may wind up thinking that their wants and needs are not important.

Nonverbally, parents can show their children they accept them through gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal behaviors. Parents should try to eliminate behaviors like yelling and not paying attention to their children. Such behaviors get in the way of effective communication. Practice makes perfect: Parents must learn to show acceptance in ways their children will pick up on.

***Communicate at your children's level.** When parents communicate with their children, it is important for them to come down to their children's level both verbally and physically. Verbally, parents should try to use age-appropriate language that their children can easily understand. With younger children, this can be done by using simple words. For example, young children are much more likely to understand a

direction such as, "No hitting your sister," as opposed to "It is not acceptable to hit your sister." Parents should try to know what their children are able to understand and they should try not to communicate in ways that their children are not able to understand. Physically, parents should not, for example, tower over their children when talking or communicating with them. Instead, they should try to come down to their children's level by lowering themselves, either by kneeling, sitting, stooping, etc. This will make eye contact much easier to maintain, and children are much less likely to feel intimidated by parents when they are eye to eye.

***Learn how to really listen.** Listening is a skill that must be learned and practiced. Listening is an important part of effective communication. When parents listen to their children they are showing them that they are interested and they care about what their children have to say. Here are some important steps to becoming a good listener:

>Make and maintain eye contact.

Parents who do this are showing their children that they are involved and interested. Children might get just the opposite message - that their parents are not interested in what they're saying - if minimal eye contact is made.

>Eliminate distractions. When children express a desire to talk, parents should give them their undivided attention. They should put aside what they were doing, face their children, and give them their undivided attention. If parents, for example, continue to read the paper or to watch television while their children are trying to communicate with them, children may get the message that their parents aren't interested in what they have to say, or that what they have to say is not important. If children express a desire to talk at a time that the parent is unable to, parents can schedule a time later on to talk with their children.

>Listen with a closed mouth.

Parents should try to keep the interruptions to a minimum while their children are speaking. They can offer encouragement, for example through a smile or a touch, without interrupting. Interruptions often break the speaker's train of thought, and this can be very frustrating.

>Let your children know they have been heard. After children are finished speaking,

parents can show them that they have been listening by restating what was said, only in slightly different words. For example, "Boy, it sounds like you really had a good day in pre-school." Not only will this let children know that their parents have been listening. This will also offer an opportunity for clarification if the parents are misinterpreting the message their children are trying to get across.

***Keep conversations brief.** The younger children are, the more difficult it is for them to sit through long speeches. One good rule for parents is to speak to young children for no longer than 30 seconds, then ask them to comment on what was said. The goal is for parents to pass on information a little at a time while checking that their children are paying attention to and understanding what is being said at regular intervals. Parents should let their children decide when enough is enough. Parents can look for clues that their children have had enough. Some clues include fidgeting, lack of eye contact, distractibility, etc. Parents need to know when to communicate with their children, but they also need to know when to back off, too.

***Ask the right questions.** Some questions help conversations along, while some can stop conversations dead in their

tracks. Parents should try to ask open-ended questions in their conversations with their children. Such questions often require an in-depth response that will keep a conversation going. Open-ended questions that begin with the words "what," "where," "whom," or "how" are often very useful in getting children to open up. Parents should try to avoid asking questions that require only a yes or no answer. While asking the right questions can help a conversation along, parents need to be careful not to ask too many questions while conversing with their children. When this happens, conversations can quickly turn into interrogations, and children will be much less likely to open up.

***Express your own feelings and ideas when communicating with children.** For communication to be effective, it must be a two way street. Not only must parents be available to and listen to their children for effective communication to take place; they must also be willing to share their own thoughts and feelings with their children. Parents can teach their children many things, for example, morals and values, by expressing their thoughts and feelings. When expressing their ideas and feelings, however, parents must be careful to do so in a

non-judgmental way. It seems logical that the more parents open up to their children, the more their children will open up to them.

***Regularly schedule family meetings or times to talk.** One very useful communication tool for families with older children is the regularly scheduled time to talk. This can be done in a number of ways. First of all, there is the family meeting. Family meetings can be scheduled, for example, once a week, and/or whenever there is something that the family needs to discuss. Families can use family meeting time to iron out the details of daily living, for example chores, curfews and bedtimes. Family meeting time can also be used to air grievances and to talk about problems. These times can also be used to talk about positive things that have occurred during the last week. What's important is that each family member be given time to talk to and be heard by other family members.

Regularly scheduled times to talk and communicate don't have to be as formal as the family meeting. For example, families can use the dinner hour each night as a time to catch up with each other. Or, parents can set aside time to play communication games, such as picking specific topics of discussion and giving everyone in the family a chance to express their opinions. What's

important is that families set aside time at regular intervals to communicate with one another.

***Admit it when you don't know something.** When children ask questions that their parents can't answer, they should admit that they don't know. Parents can use such instances as learning experiences. For example, parents can teach their children how to get the information they're looking for by taking them to the library, using the encyclopedia, etc. It's far better for parents to show their children that they're human and thus don't know everything than it is to make up some answer that might not be true.

***Try to make explanations complete.** When answering their children's questions, parents should try to give them as much information as they need, even if the topic is something parents don't feel comfortable discussing. This doesn't mean that parents must go into great detail. It's just important that parents know how much information their children need and then give it to them. Parents should make sure that the information they give their children is age-appropriate. Parents should also encourage their children to ask questions. This will help parents figure out just what

information their children are looking for. Not giving enough information can lead children to draw conclusions that aren't necessarily true.

Communicating During Conflicts

All families will have conflicts at one time or another. While such conflicts can be upsetting, they need not be too disruptive. There are many different things that parents can do to smoothly get through conflicts and to keep the lines of communication open at the same time. Here are some suggestions.

***Work on one problem at a time.**

During conflicts, it is best to try to solve one problem at a time. It is not a good idea to bring up many different issues at once. This can be very confusing to both children and their parents. When this happens families can quickly lose sight of the real issues.

***Look for creative ways to solve problems.** When trying to solve conflicts, parents should try to keep in mind that there is usually more than one solution to any problem. Parents and children should work together to find solutions that are agreeable to all parties. Learning to be flexible when solving problems is a great tool for children to have. If one solution doesn't work, parents should try to be flexible enough to try alternative solutions.

***Be polite.** Parents shouldn't forget the ordinary rules of politeness simply because they are dealing with their children. During conflicts, or at any other time, parents should treat their children with the same amount of respect that they would show to any other person. Children are people, too, and they deserve to be treated with respect. Sometimes during the heat of an argument or disagreement parents say things to their children that they would never say to another relative or a close friend. Parents should make an effort not to do this.

***Use "I" messages.** When discussing conflicts with their children, parents should always try to state problems in terms of how they feel. For example, instead of saying something like "You never pick up your clothes like you're supposed to," parents should try something like "I feel frustrated when you don't pick up your clothes." By using "I" messages, parents are telling their children how their behavior makes them feel, instead of accusing and/or blaming. "I" messages are effective because children are much less likely to resist or rebel against something that is stated in terms of how the parent feels. Stating things in terms of "I" messages are much less

threatening to children than are accusing and/or blaming. "I" messages also show children how to take responsibility for their own actions. Parents who express their feelings in such a way are also teaching their children to do the same.

***Be willing to forgive.** Teach your children to be forgiving by doing so yourself.

How To Avoid Negative Communication

Unfortunately, many parents aren't aware of just how often they use negative forms of communication with their children. These parents may, as a result, be planting the seeds of mistrust and low self-esteem in their children. This is why it is so important for parents to become aware of and to correct any negative forms of communication they may be using with their children. Below is a list of examples of negative communication. Parents should go through this list and identify any of these negative communication patterns that seem familiar. After identifying problem areas, parents can then begin making changes. Keep in mind that the list below does not contain every possible example of negative communication. There are probably many things that can be considered negative communication that are not included on the list below.

Examples Of Negative Communication That Parents Should Avoid

***Nagging and lecturing.** Nagging is repeating something that has already been said. Lecturing is giving more information than is needed without stopping to listen to other opinions or ideas. Parents can avoid nagging and lecturing by keeping their conversations with their children brief. Parents should also keep in mind that once they have told their children something once, there is no need to say it again. Instead of nagging, parents should use a consequence other than nagging (for example, time-out) when their children do not do something they have been told to do. Nagging and lecturing cause children to stop listening or to become defensive or resentful.

***Interrupting.** When children are talking, parents should give them the opportunity to finish what they're saying before speaking themselves. This is common courtesy. Children who feel that they can't get a word in edgewise with their parents may stop communicating with them altogether.

***Criticizing.** Parents should avoid criticizing their children's thoughts,

feelings, ideas, and/or children themselves. Children often see such criticisms as direct attacks, and the result can be lowered self-esteem. When necessary, parents should criticize behavior, or what children have done, not children themselves.

***Dwelling on the past.** Once a problem or conflict is solved, parents should try not to mention it again. Children should be allowed to start over with a clean slate. Parents who constantly bring up their children's past mistakes are teaching their children to hold grudges for long periods of time. Also, children need to know that once a matter is settled it remains settled.

***Trying to control children through the use of guilt.** This involves trying to make children feel guilty because of their thoughts, feelings, and/or actions. Parents who use guilt to control their children may do great harm to their relationship with their children.

***Using sarcasm.** Parents are using sarcasm when they say things they don't mean and imply the opposite of what they're saying through their tone of voice. An example is a parent saying something like, "Oh, aren't **you** graceful," when a child breaks something. The use of sarcasm hurts children. Sarcasm is never a useful tool for parents who are

trying to effectively communicate with their children.

***Telling your children how to solve their problems.** This happens when parents jump in and tell their children how they should do things instead of letting them have some input into solutions for problems. Parents who tell their children how to solve their problems may lead children to believe that they have no control over their own lives. Such children may end up believing that their parents don't trust them. Or, they may resent being told what to do and as a result resist their parents' directions.

***Putting children down.** Put-downs can come in many different forms such as name calling, ridiculing, judging, blaming, etc. Put-downs are detrimental to effective communication. Put-downs can damage children's self-esteem. Children who are put down by their parents often feel rejected, unloved, and inadequate.

***Using threats.** Threats are rarely effective. They often make children feel powerless and resentful of their parents.

***Lying.** No matter how tempting it is to make up a lie to, for example, avoid

talking about uncomfortable topics like sex, parents should not do so. Parents should try to be open and honest with their children. This will encourage children to be open and honest with their parents. Also, children are very perceptive. They are often very good at sensing when their parents are not being totally honest with them. This can lead to feelings of mistrust.

***Denying children's feelings.** When children tell their parents how they feel, parents shouldn't make light of these feelings. If, for example, a parent feels his or her child shouldn't feel sad about losing a baseball game, he or she shouldn't say so. Parents should instead say something supportive, for example, "I know you really wanted to win. It's hard to lose sometimes." With younger children, this can be done by using simple, concrete words. Children need to have their feelings supported by their parents. Parents need to show their children understanding when it comes to their feelings. If they don't, children will as a result feel misunderstood by their parents.

Communication Builders

Here are some examples of things parents can say to their children to help open the lines of communication:

"I'd like to hear about it."

"Tell me more about that."

"Shoot. I'm listening."

"I understand."

"What do you think about ..."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"That's interesting."

"Wow!"

"I'm interested."

"Explain that to me."

Effective, open communication takes a lot of hard work and practice. Parents should remember that they will not be perfect. Parents make mistakes. What is important is that parents make the effort to effectively communicate with their children starting when their children are very young. The result will be a much closer, positive relationship between parents and their children.



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