



Family Communication

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Communication is the basic building block of our relationships.

It is through communication that we convey our thoughts, feelings, and connection to one another. It is much more than the words you say. It is what you say, how you say it, why you say it, when you say it, and what you don't say. It is your facial expression, your gestures, your posture, and your tone of voice.

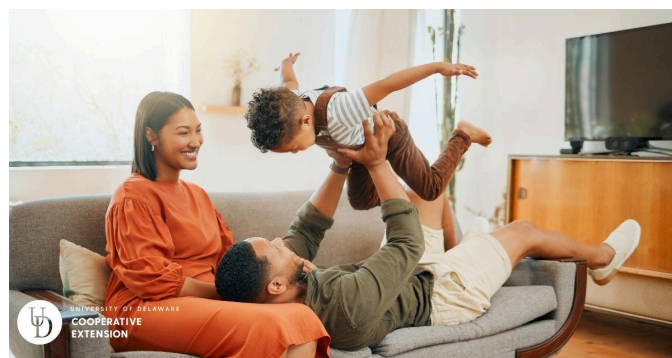
- Developing good communication skills is critical for successful relationships, whether parent, child, spouse, or sibling relationship.
- Good communication skills reduce the need for attention-getting behavior. As children and teens feel more comfortable about expressing their feelings, they can be more assertive in situations that could be harmful. When they can share their fears and concerns—as well as what makes them happy—they are less likely to act in negative ways.
- Generally, when we feel heard, we are less angry, stressed, and more open to resolving problems than when we feel misunderstood. Feeling heard and understood also develops trust and caring between people.

Communication is a two-way process.

- For communication to happen there must be (1) a sender—who conveys a message—and (2) a receiver—to whom the message is sent.
- In successful communication the sender is clear and accurately conveys the message they are trying to send. Also, the receiver clearly

understands the message. When this occurs, miscommunication is avoided.

- Miscommunication occurs if the sender does not send a clear message and/or the receiver does not understand the message sent by the sender.



Many things can get in the way of good communication.

For example:

1. When we assume we know what others are thinking, or that they should know what we are thinking.
2. When we focus on what we want to say while others are talking, instead of listening to them.
3. When we bring up other problems and issues unrelated to the topic at hand.
4. When we assume we know what is right for others and try to convince them of this.

All of these things either keep us from sending a clear message or keep us from receiving the message the other person is trying to send.

Communicating well takes practice and effort.

It is not something that comes naturally for most of us. Good family communication involves being both an active listener and a thoughtful speaker. Below are some keys to good communication. These skills and techniques may seem strange and awkward at first. But if you stick with them, they will become natural in time. As an added bonus, you will improve all of your communication with others (inside and outside your family).

Active Listening

Active listening is a way of listening to others that lets them know you are working to understand the message they are sending.

1. Make sure your body language conveys to them that you are interested and listening. You can make eye contact with them, turn your body toward them, and nod as they are talking to let them know you are listening. Avoid making negative facial expressions.
2. Avoid passing judgment on what has been said or on the person speaking. This may discourage the speaker from wanting to be open and honest with you.
3. Reduce any distractions that will keep you from focusing on their message. Try to stop whatever you are doing that may distract you from their message, such as watching television or trying to read while the person is talking to you. You may need to tell them, “I will be better able to listen to you once I am done with ____.” Trying to listen while doing other tasks usually does not allow one to clearly hear the message.
4. Listen for the content and the feelings behind the words. Do not just listen to the content of what is being said. Listen for the feeling that the person is trying to convey to you. Are they expressing joy, sadness, excitement, or anger—either through their words or body language?
5. When the person has finished talking, paraphrase back to them what you heard them

saying, “What I am hearing from you is..... “It sounds like was very upsetting for you.”

6. Ask questions for clarification if statements are unclear to you. Asking questions like “what do you mean by...” can strengthen your understanding of the situation and prevent you from misinterpreting the message being given to you.
7. Do not offer advice to the person. When we offer advice—especially when it was not asked for—this often shuts down communication. The person first needs to know that you have understood them and that they have sent their message clearly to you.

You will be surprised at how your conversations and relationships change when you focus on listening to the other person— rather than thinking of your next response.

Why is Active Listening so Important?

- By being active listeners, we may discover that the speaker is having a problem which they need help. Oftentimes, these problems are different from our own experiences, so we must pay attention to have a better understanding.
- As teens adjust to the changes in their bodies and in their social world, they need help dealing with new emotions and experiences. They will seek help from someone — often from other teens who may provide poor advice and information. They will seek help from us if we have shown that we listen actively and with an open mind.
- Listening builds self-esteem through making children and teens feel important, valued, and understood.
- Our interest shown through our active listening encourages children to think about their behavior. Even when their thinking is not completely logical, active listening is a sign of love and respect.
- How well we listen influences how well our children listen to us and to other important people in their lives.
- Adolescents often have difficulty expressing their feelings. Parents who are active listeners

and concerned speakers encourage open communication and expressions of mutual affection.

Being a Thoughtful Speaker

We are speaking SPEAKING well when we:

- repeat the feelings, not the facts, the speaker expressed. “Sometimes you’re uncomfortable being with your friends because they’re curious about drugs.”
- don’t express disapproval or disgust, or make negative facial or body expressions.
- attack the problem, not our children or their friends. “I know it’s scary to be pressured into trying drugs. We can talk about ways to handle that.”
- explain how their behavior makes us feel, rather than criticizing and accusing them. “I feel angry when the table still isn’t set and dinner is ready,” is much better than, “You are so lazy. When are you going to set the table?”
- ask questions necessary to understand the situation, but respect privacy within realistic limits.
- encourage children to find and weigh options.
- If your child is seeking advice or guidance, suggest other ideas or other ways to think about the situation.
- encourage further discussion.

Nonverbal Communication

Even without saying a word, a person communicates through facial expressions, body positions, gestures, and mannerisms. Many times the unspoken actions are even more important than the spoken word. Here’s an example.

Your teenage son walks in after school. You ask, “How did things go at school today?” He smiles and says, “Wonderful.” That is the verbal message. There also is a nonverbal message, however. Your son’s smile was fleeting, his eyes were turned down, and he headed for his room as he spoke.

If you noticed your son’s body language, you might guess that he did not have a wonderful day. You would probably feel uneasy about his behavior and assume that something was wrong. You could then take the time to help him with whatever his problem might be.

Remember that you, too, send nonverbal messages.

For example, when your child comes home, do you continue your work and ask, “How was your day?” without even looking up? You clearly show by your actions that you aren’t really interested in your child’s response.

Teaching Children to Communicate

Children have to learn how to express themselves clearly and how to listen to others.

- Beginning in infancy, we can express affection by speaking to our children as we would like them to speak to us. They are learning how to get the attention of others and how to get their message across. They are also learning that communication is a two-way process.
- Children learn their skills from how we respond to them and how we communicate with them.

One of the first steps in teaching our children is for us to listen actively to them.

- When we actively listen to children, we are letting them know that they can send a message and that their message is important to us. As noted before, it is important that we give them our full attention—listening for the feelings as well as the content of their message. We must restrain from offering advice right away.

Second, we need to actively teach children how to listen.

- The child needs to focus on the person who is talking—again eliminating as many distractions as possible. This may mean turning off the television, asking them to look at you, or having them come in the same room with you while you talk with them.

- Just as we give them our attention, we need to teach youngsters to give their attention to others.
- To be sure they have understood your message, ask youngsters to repeat back to you—in their own words—what they heard from you. In this way, you are teaching them to paraphrase what they have heard.
- Children can also be asked what feeling they are picking up from you. Are you happy, irritated, or sad? In this way they can begin to connect feeling and content.
- If the child does not repeat the message back clearly, this offers a time for clarification and another opportunity to teach that good communication takes effort—and that we sometimes don't get it right the first time.

Finally, children learn the most by communicating with us and by watching how adults communicate with each other.

- We need to be sure to be good role models and to take the time to listen and clearly send our own messages.
- Through childhood they will imitate what we say and how we say it. As children become teens, they will continue to look to us for guidance, if we provide it in a way that recognizes their increasing maturity and makes them feel loved.

Family Communication

More people = more complex communication.

- With more people, there are more opportunities for communication—and greater chances for conflict to arise.
- It is important that families establish good lines of communication so that all family members can feel heard and understood and conflicts can be resolved.

Families are faced with balancing the needs and wants of many different people. Naturally conflicts are going to arise.

- It is impossible for everyone's needs to be met all the time.

- Compromise does not mean that there is a winner and a loser—but rather that a “new solution” has been found.
- Generating “win/win solutions” challenges us to be creative in developing solutions to problems—rather than focusing on our own needs or wants.
- To come up with “win/win solutions,” family members need good communication skills—so that everyone's point of view and suggestions are expressed clearly and heard by the other family members.

Here are some ways to come up with “win/win” solutions:

- It is important that all persons experiencing the conflict be included—even if this means calling a 10-minute “time out” so people can calm down. (Set the kitchen timer, and have people run around the block—or use some similar positive way to help people cool down.)
- Use neutral language. This means that family members may not name-call or pass judgment on others' ideas or needs.
- Each person's request needs to be considered. Each person's opinion needs to be heard.
- Everyone needs to use their active listening skills (outlined before)—paraphrasing the points of view of other family members.
- Once everyone feels heard and understood, then the process can move to generating new solutions to resolve the conflict.
- The group should generate as many new solutions to the problem as they can—focusing on how to resolve the problem, not just how to meet one's own needs.
- Keep a list of all the solution ideas that are generated.
- Some of the solutions can be silly and outrageous. Humor helps us relax our minds, which can help us do our best thinking.
- When all the possible solutions have been generated, go through each idea and discuss it. Would this solve the problem? Could we

actually do it? How hard or easy would it be to do this?

- The group can vote on the best solution. If only 2 people are involved, then they must agree on a solution before the issue is considered resolved.

Seek Professional Help

- If communication problems persist, do not lose hope! Seeking professional help from a therapist/counselor may give you the safe space you need to work through communication issues with your family.

Conclusion

Try to:

- LISTEN actively.
- THINK about what others are saying.
- SPEAK with encouragement and respect.

Good communication can benefit your family in many ways.

It doesn't guarantee that your family won't have any problems, or that your relationship with your teen will always be pleasant. But communication is a powerful tool to use to help kids grow up healthy and ready to solve problems.

References

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