

Family Communication

Communication is the single greatest factor affecting a person's relationships with others. It is the key to accomplishing individual and family goals. Positive communication can be a useful tool in drawing a family together and helping them learn to support, rather than harm one another. Communicating with our families is an ongoing challenge.

Some families are naturally good at communicating, however, many families would like to work at improving their skills. The way we communicate (or don't communicate) is often taught in the home. Take a moment to think about how the family you grew up in communicated with each other. Was it positive and effective? Think about how you would like to teach your children to communicate. Remember, they will learn communication skills and communication styles from you.

Acceptance is a key ingredient in family communication. You may not agree with other family members, but it is essential that you show your respect by listening and speaking about ideas, feelings, and concerns. Acknowledge your differences and allow family members to have differences of opinion. Without acknowledgment and recognition, family members may give up on communicating.

Tips For Building Effective Communication Skills

- ~ Describe what needs to be done rather than commenting on the child or judging his behavior. "I see a jacket which needs to be hung up." versus "When are you ever going to learn to hang up your jacket?"
- ~ Frame requests in a positive way. "Thank you for turning down the TV while I'm on the phone." versus, "Turn down the TV or else!"
- ~ Focus on your feelings instead of talking about the person's character. "When you come home late, I worry because I don't know where you are." versus "You are inconsiderate and selfish."
- ~ Write notes when you feel the written word can be more powerful. "I would appreciate it if you would clean the living room before I come home because we are expecting some company tonight."
- ~ Read to your child. This will help him or her build good communication skills including: listening, expressing and understanding what the other person thinks and says.
- ~ Develop a sense of humor. Tell funny stories and jokes, read humorous books, sing funny songs.
- ~ Provide healthy outlets for expressions of feelings. "You may tell me that you are angry with your brother, but you may not punch him. Hit the pillow instead."
- ~ Use a favorable tone of voice. Avoid sounding harsh, gruff, abrupt or sarcastic. Don't talk "down" to your child; talk to him as you would to your friends.
- ~ Be aware of special times for focusing on good communication. For example, in the morning because there is the tendency to rush, it is often difficult to connect with others. Greet your family in the morning and say something positive about the day ahead. Set the tone for the day. Bedtime is another time for connecting. This is a good time to listen to a child's concerns, give praise and encouragement, and build confidence.
- ~ Change the setting. If you are having a difficult time talking with a family member, try having the conversation in a different place.

With young children, go to another room where the disruptive behavior hasn't occurred and where there are no other family members. With older kids, a car ride often works because adolescents may be more comfortable with less eye contact. Kids may feel less threatened if there's a mild form of diversion.

~ If one or both people during a conversation become very emotional, it may be best to reschedule the discussion. "I can see that we are both feeling very upset. How about talking about this later today, like after dinner?"

~ Don't put off talking about something that is on your mind. The more you think about the problem, the worse it becomes, and the madder you get.

~ Choose a time when both of you can listen.

~ Be a good listener. Avoid judging or evaluating the other person. You have to hear what they are trying to say.

~ Be aware of your non-verbal messages. Your body language, the tone of voice, and the look on your face are sending messages, too.

~ Check out what you are hearing by paraphrasing and clarifying. "It sounds like you are saying . . ." or "You seem to feel . . . Is that what you are trying to say?"

~ Think of conversation as a process. Both people are trying to get what they want. It's going to take some time to get to the point where both partners are receiving what they need and giving what the other person needs, too.

~ Ask for what you need. Always be aware of the message you want to convey. "I need you to let me know where you are going and when you will be home so I don't worry about you."

~ Try to be positive and convey acceptance. Don't put the other person on the defensive end. No one likes to be blamed.

~ Stay calm and be in control of your emotions.

~ Don't have expectations about what your partner or child may say in response to you. Keep an open mind.

~ Have a family meeting. Family meetings offer a good forum to discuss concerns, plan family activities and share achievements.

~ Agree to disagree. When you sense that you and the other person will have a difference of opinion, agree in the beginning of the conversation to disagree. "I know that when we go shopping, you and I like different styles. That's OK. What we'll need to do is find something that is suitable for the occasion" or "It's alright that you and I see this problem differently. However, we need to find a way to resolve it so both of us are satisfied."

Barriers to Communication

These are some of the difficulties or barriers to communication that we encounter when communicating with others.

1. We assume others see things the same way that we do. Remember that each person has a different history which will affect their interpretation of events.
2. We do not clarify enough. Be very specific when talking with family members, particularly when discussing a problem.
3. We use selective hearing; hear what we want to hear, not what is being said.
4. We don't pay attention.
5. We talk too much and listen too little.
6. We send "put down" messages. We blame, criticize, and call people names.
7. We turn others off with our tone of voice and the look on our face.
8. We don't ask for feedback.
9. We yell and shout.

Use “I-Messages” to Improve Communication

The basic beginning in good communication is an “I-message”. There are three parts to an “I-message”, and they include:

1. **When**
2. **I feel . . .**
3. **Because.**

These three parts do not have to be in this exact order or wording. See the following examples of “I-messages” and practice using I-messages when you communicate with your family

Part One

When you leave your clothes
on the floor . . .

When you come late without
calling . . .

I feel as if I’ve done
something wrong . . .

I get mad and feel
mistreated . . .

Part Two

. . . . I get angry

. I worry

. . . when you are moody and
won’t speak to me

. . . . when I see you laying
around all day waiting for me to
get home and cook dinner . . .

Part Three

. . . . because I just picked up
around the house.

. . . . because I like to know
you are safe.

. because you seem like
you’re mad at me.

. because I worked all
day and I’m tired, too.

Healthy Families

Research tells us what’s “right” with some families and what makes them happy, healthy families.

Healthy families have most or all of the following characteristics:

1. Hold basic values in common.
2. Have common goals.
3. Have respect for each other.
4. Enjoy the humor in everyday live.
5. Are capable of expressing love and affection.
6. Communicate well and openly.
7. Deal with conflicts constructively.
8. Share responsibility.
9. Have reasonable expectations of one another.
10. Are flexible in assuming roles.
11. Accept and adapt to change.
12. Protect the privacy of one another.
13. Have concern for the welfare of others.
14. Focus leisure activities at home.
15. Take part in family celebrations and rituals.
16. Have shared faith.

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