



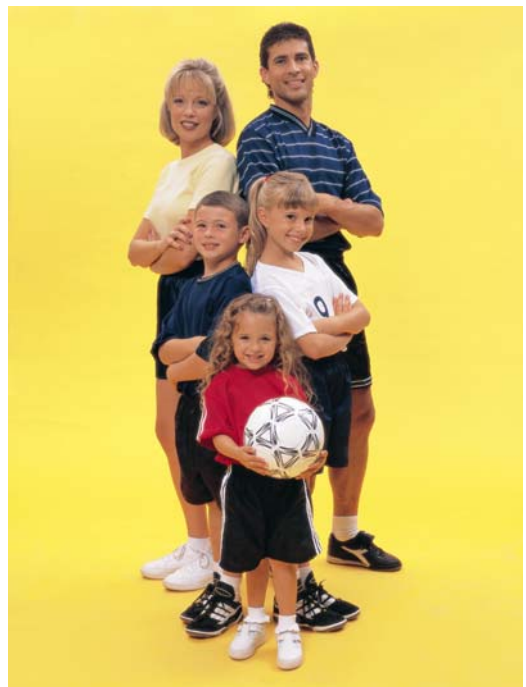
# Families Matter!

## Communication Skills for You and Your Family

### Communication is the basic building block of our relationships.

It is through communication that we convey our thoughts, feelings, and connection to one another.

- Developing good communication skills is critical for successful relationships, whether parent, child, spouse, or sibling relationship.
- We all have had experiences where (1) we have felt heard and understood *and* we've all had experiences (2) where we have felt misunderstood and even ignored.
- 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 she is trying to

send. Also, the receiver clearly understands the message.

- 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. 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 eventually become natural. 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.

2. 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.



3. 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?
4. 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."

5. 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.**



## **Teaching Children to Communicate**

**Children need to be taught how to communicate well**, which means learning both how to express themselves clearly and how to listen to others.

- From the moment children begin to utter sounds, they are learning how to communicate. 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 about communication from how we respond to them and how we communicate with them.

**One of the first steps in teaching our children how to communicate well 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.**

- First 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.



## **Family Communication**

**More people = more complex communication.**

- With more people, there are more opportunities for communication—and greater chances for conflict to arise.
  - When two people are involved, there is the opportunity for one relationship.
  - When three people are involved, there is the opportunity for three relationships.
  - With four, there are six possible relationships.
  - With five, there are ten possible relationships, and so on.
- 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 other’s 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.



I hope you find this information helpful in the month ahead!

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