

Building Better Family Communication

Being able to express both positive and negative feelings and solve problems together are keys to a successful and happy family. Unfortunately, few parents were raised in families where open, empathetic listening and communication was the norm. It is never too late to learn to improve your family communication skills.

Communication Tips

Practice these simple rules for better listening and communicating within your family:

- **Think before you speak:** Take the time to contemplate your message. Do not react hastily to what someone says if you disagree. You may regret what you say. Children are very perceptive about pointing out inconsistencies and inaccuracies in your messages.
- **Be as clear as possible:** Whether it is an expectation, emotion, question or other message, be very specific about what you are trying to express, especially with young children. Mixed and incomplete messages are very easy to misinterpret. Avoid sarcastic comments with double meanings, like, "I really don't care what you do."
- **Stay on topic:** It is natural to want to avoid talking about the difficult things. Help family members stay on track by saying things like, "That is an interesting thought, but I would like to finish our discussion about _____ first." Avoid bringing up a litany of past offenses, and stick to the topic of the moment.
- **Maintain consistent eye contact while talking and listening:** Show your interest in what others have to say by following them with your eyes. Nodding occasionally gives the message that you are still with them.
- **Make your tone match your message:** It is tempting to break up a serious discussion with laughter. Do not use humor to avoid a meaningful, serious topic. Humor has its important place, but it can diffuse your serious message.
- **Refrain from judging or disagreeing while listening:** Instead, aim to understand. Avoid interrupting while someone is talking. Likewise, ask that a family member not interrupt you. Aim for healthy dialogue, not one-sided lectures.
- **Use "I" statements instead of judgmental and exaggerative "you" statements:** For instance, instead of saying to your child, "You never listen to what we have to say," rephrase your message: "I feel that you are not listening carefully to what we have to say."
- **Avoid criticizing, ridiculing, embarrassing, whining at or nagging another family member:** Demonstrate that fair, constructive and open dialogue is the best way to settle differences.
- **Give each person an equal say:** Be sure to include every family member, especially young children.
- **Stress the respect of differences:** Enforce your family rules, but allow each family member a healthy means of expressing disagreement.
- **Avoid speaking on behalf of another family member unless they ask you to do so:** Let that person indicate his or her own preferences and opinions.
- **Be consistent with your partner when communicating with children:** Do not confuse a child by disagreeing or arguing with the other parent. Discuss what you are going to talk about with the children beforehand, and decide who will lead the discussion.
- **Talk to a young child on his or her level:** When talking to a preschooler, use language he or she will understand. Get down on his or her eye level to communicate effectively.

Use Active Listening with Your Children

Therapists use a technique known as "active listening" to help patients express their feelings. As a parent, you can use this technique to help your children, too.

Your kids want you to listen, not solve their problem for them. Your child comes home from school and says, "None of the other kids like me." You respond, "Of course they do," and, "You have to learn to love yourself first." You have just told your child that how he or she feels is incorrect and given him or her a solution that he or she has no hope of understanding.

Consider these tips for active listening:

- Learn to be an active listener: In the example above, simply saying, “You feel like you don’t have any friends,” lets your child know you understand how he or she feels. This encourages him or her to talk more about the hurt feelings and come up with solutions that will work.
- Say less: Most of the time your child wants you to listen, not tell him or her what to do. Make yourself available, listen carefully and demonstrate your sincere eagerness to understand and hear his or her story by saying, “Wow, go on,” “No kidding” or “That’s very interesting,” or nothing at all.

Do not expect to come to a resolution for every problem. Just like the problems that adults face, children’s issues will not always be resolved in one discussion. Some problems do not have simple and neat solutions. By not ending your discussion on a note of false hope, your children will get the message that you take it seriously, too. This gives him or her a chance to work things out by himself or herself.

Family Meetings

Sit down together at a family meeting, and work as a team. Aim for the following goals:

- Discuss problems that affect any and all family members.
- Provide a safe, fair forum for each member to voice problems, complaints and praises.
- Gather input from each member that will shape parental decisions.
- Foster a spirit of family unity, openness and cooperation.

Celebrate family success.

Establish clear family meeting rules (e.g., no TV or phone calls are allowed during meetings and each family member must treat all members with respect). Anyone can call a family meeting when they have an issue to discuss.

During the meeting, let each person have a turn to talk, and discourage interrupting and yelling. Require that each member state at least one thing they are happy about and one thing they would like to change. Invite each member to offer solutions to a family problem. Teach your children to be problem-solvers and critical thinkers. Go around the table, and ask each child for his or her input (e.g., “Mary, how do you feel about letting Grandpa stay with us?”).

One great way to encourage family unity is to create a family “mission statement,” or motto. For example, your family’s motto may be “The Smiths: All for one and one for all, we help each other with problems big and small.” Invite your children to be creative, and get them excited about family projects.

Stress that family meeting times are not the only occasion to discuss problems. Be flexible. Establish an “open door” policy for your children to talk to you and your partner anytime.

Also, encourage spontaneous and impromptu discussions. With everyone’s busy schedule, it may be difficult to find time to sit down and really talk with your family members. Take advantage whenever the occasion arises to talk with your children and your partner.

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