

Communication skills that will last a lifetime

Improving Relationships



With so many pressures facing children and parents today, maintaining quality family relationships are more important than ever. Yet for many different reasons, we're not always as effective at communicating as we need to be, and as a result we create unintended problems.

The need for open, honest, and effective communication is a critical component of any relationship. If you would like to improve communication with your children (and others in your life), here are some commonsense suggestions that can make a real difference.

Be respectful. Communication involves talking and listening. When your children are talking, do your best to give them your undivided attention. "Active" listening is critical (more on this topic later in the newsletter).

Tune into feelings. When children talk to their parents about something that is concerning, it can

be difficult for them to express their feelings. It's critical to tune into their feelings and put that feeling word into a sentence. In this way you show you understand and you also validate their feelings.

Create time to talk. Sometimes communication doesn't happen unless we make time for it. Ensure your family enjoys a meal together as often as possible and make it a point to involve the whole family in the conversation.

Make eye contact. Looking at someone eye-to-eye when having a conversation sends the message that you are listening and that what they have to say is important. When talking and listening to young children, lower yourself (physically) to their level.

Think before speaking. When children ask for your opinion or help with a particular concern they have take a few minutes to think about it, and ask them to think about it as well. When you come together again you can both share your thoughts. If you need to have a tough conversation with your child, think through what you are going to say and questions that might arise.

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Be aware of non-verbal communication. This includes facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, or periods of silence. Children can sense if your verbal and non-verbal communication do not match.

Let them finish speaking. Do you finish your child's sentences or inappropriately change a subject to say something that's on your mind? This can leave your child thinking that talking to you is a waste of time.

Be approachable. If children think they'll be judged or get a lecture every time they talk about an idea or personal experience, they will shut down. Take their concerns seriously – empathize and listen. If you do this with the small stuff, they are more likely to discuss important matters with you.

The bottom line

The late humourist Erma Bombeck once said, "It seems rather incongruous that in a society of super sophisticated communication, we often suffer from a shortage of listeners."

"Communication involves both talking and listening. The ability to really listen to what is being said is something we are not always taught to do, yet when we employ active listening skills, our communication effectiveness and our relationships improve dramatically."

Sometimes when children have problems their parents' efforts at "listening" result in lecturing and offering advice. Unsolicited advice provides little opportunity for children to share their feelings and can result in children becoming reliant on others' influence. In turn, children may develop inadequate decision-making skills as they mature. Parents who don't listen to their children's ideas

or show respect for what they are saying may end up with teenagers who live in a world of their own and refuse to listen to their parents.

Improve your children's listening habits

- When reading to young children, encourage them to ask questions and comment on the story.
- As children get older, establish "listening opportunities" when you block out distractions and make it a point to listen to one another.
- Teach children to show they are listening. If they are preoccupied with playing, let them know it is helpful to show by their expressions that they are listening.
- Be a good role model by paying attention while your children speak to you.
- Give children positive feedback if they demonstrate good listening skills. Here's how to be a better listener yourself:
- Ensure a respectful attitude, concentrate on what is being said, and maintain eye contact.
- Be silent, pay attention, and don't think about how you will respond.
- Avoid too many probing questions like "why?" This can shift the focus from listening and trying to understand feelings, to analyzing.
- Be sensitive about when to talk and when to keep quiet.

