

## Communicating with Your Child

By Carolyn Roof and Thomas Schreiber

*Talking with children is not always easy. Sometimes they don't listen, sometimes you don't know what to say, and sometimes what you say is not what they hear. Still, in spite of it all, you must try to communicate with them. It has been our experience that troubled children will either talk or act out their problems, with the former usually being preferable to the latter. The following tips are provided to help you and your child communicate more effectively.*

### What to Do

DO listen to your child with an open mind. We all have preconceived notions of what is right and wrong. No one expects us to give up our value systems because our children do not agree, however, it is important to communicate that they are being heard and understood.

DO listen quietly and attentively. Remember that we cannot talk and listen at the same time. Listen to what your child has to say before responding.

DO maintain eye contact with your child while she is talking. Nonverbal messages often come across louder than words. Make sure they are saying, "What you have to say is most important to me right now."

DO accept your child's feelings. Although his feelings may not be what you want them to be, we all have a right to our own feelings. Accepting your child's feelings does not mean you condone behavior you find objectionable.

DO be clear and specific. Children need boundaries. If the answer is "no", say "no". If the answer is "yes", say "yes". Your children cannot read your mind.

DO ask for your children's ideas and opinions. It lets them know you value what they think and that it is safe for them to talk with you.

DO help your child label feelings. Children will

experience a wide range of emotions, but they may not have the words to identify them. Help children understand what it is that they are feeling and put words to those feelings. It might be helpful to say, "I can see you are angry." or "I can see you are hurt. Would you like to talk about how you are feeling?"

DO be honest and open with your own feelings to the extent that fits within your emotional comfort zone. However, don't overload your child with more than he can handle.

DO accept differences in opinions. You should not ask a question unless you are fully prepared to accept the answer.

DO control your tone of voice. If you are screaming or if there is anger in your voice, your child will react with either anger or fear, and effective communication cannot occur under these conditions.

Do be a positive role model when communicating. Remember that although children will not always do what you say, they will often do what you do.

DO try to talk where there are no distractions. Serious conversations are best held in private where you can focus on your child's needs and feelings, and where they will be able to focus on yours.

### What Not to Do

DON'T judge your child's feelings. In communi-

cation, your job is to listen, understand and talk with your child. This does not mean you have to agree with the behavior in question, only that you try to understand your child's feelings and allow her to express those feelings.

**DON'T lecture.** If you start lecturing your child, pay attention to what is going on. You can almost bet he has tuned you out.

**DON'T command or order them to feel a certain way.** As mentioned previously, children have a right to their own feelings. They also, however, have an obligation to behave in a way that is morally acceptable.

**DON'T interrogate.** Your child is a child, not a criminal. If your child does not want to communicate with you at a certain time, it is usually best to wait and approach her later.

**DON'T criticize a child's feelings.** Criticizing the way he feels will not change his feelings.

**DON'T avoid conversation with your child,** however, there may be times when you cannot follow this advice. There may also be certain subjects with which you are uncomfortable. In these cases, you will just have to use your own judgment and do the best you can.

**DON'T discuss sensitive subjects with your child in front of others.** This includes reprimands and conversations concerning intimate thoughts and feelings. One of the greatest gifts you can give your child is the respect you expect for yourself.

**DON'T interrupt your child.** This is an excellent social skill to model for your child.

**DON'T show sarcasm toward your child's feelings.** If you want your child to talk to you, then do not laugh at her or belittle her when she is expressing her feelings.

**DON'T compare your child with others.** Children have a right to view the world in their own individual way, which may differ from their peers. Showing interest in and listening to your child's feelings about various topics can sometimes pre-

vent undesirable behavior.

## **Questions Parents Ask**

### ***How can I be a better listener?***

Genuinely want to be a better listener. Convey to your child that you want to listen and learn about his ideas and opinions.

Communicate with your body language that you are open to discussion and willing to listen. When your child is talking to you, look directly at him so he knows you are interested in what he has to say.

If your child wants to talk to you and it is not a good time, let him know you want to listen, but the time is not appropriate. Then be sure to set an appointment for later and stick with it. When scheduling a meeting with your child, don't keep him waiting too long, lest he forget what it was he

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There are times when it is okay to say, "I would really like to talk with you, but I am preoccupied and can't give you my full attention right now." There are other times, however, when we must muster our energy and focus on our child's needs right there and then, no matter how tired or busy WE are.

### ***What do I do when I am trying to discuss something with my child and she talks back to me?***

Set expectations for children and let them know what you expect from them when you are speaking. If your child does not respect your expecta-

tions, inform her of what the consequence will be for talking back when you are speaking.

Or you may decide it is not a good time to converse with your child. In some instances, it might be best to discontinue the discussion until another time when she is responding appropriately.

***How can I get my child to share his feelings when he is upset?***

It is important to reflect the feeling you are observing from your child. Many times, children do not want adults to solve problems for them. They may only need someone to listen. If you can let your child know that you understand or empathize with how he feels, this often helps solve problems as much or more than giving suggestions.

Most of our feelings can be identified with four basic emotions: happy, sad, angry or scared. The following are examples of feeling words and verbal responses you can use in expressing these four basic emotions:

**Happy** – glad, thrilled, excited, proud, pleased. “You seem really (excited) about that!”

**Sad** – hurt, upset, confused, unhappy, disappointed. “You were really \_\_\_\_\_ by what Susan said to you.”

**Angry** – upset, mad, furious, disturbed, enraged. “I can see how you probably felt \_\_\_\_\_ when Jane called you stupid.”

**Scared** – nervous, anxious, frightened, terrorized, fearful. “You sound \_\_\_\_\_ to me.”

***How can I get my child to talk with me about her day?***

Before asking about your child’s day, share something about your own day. Just asking, “How was your day?” will probably result in: “fine”, “okay”, or “I don’t know”. Open-ended questions or statements tend to stimulate conversation. Exam-

ples include:

- ⇒ “Tell me about something (exciting, good, neat, etc.) that happened to you today.”
- ⇒ “How would you rate your day on a scale of 1-5 with #1 being great and #5 being terrible? What happened that made it that way?”
- ⇒ “What’s on your mind right now? I would like to talk about it with you.”
- ⇒ “What you are studying in science class.”
- ⇒ “I’d really like to tell you about what happened to me today.”
- ⇒ “I’d like to hear about the game last night.”
- ⇒ “We haven’t talked for awhile about \_\_\_\_\_. What’s been going on?”

***My family members do not respect each other’s opinions and do not share their feelings. How can we communicate?***

When family conflicts develop, it is frequently because of a lack of time spent together. Family conferences with all family members present can be a positive method of sharing ideas and concerns. First, establish rules and limitations to be followed by all members. Then, schedule family meetings regularly. Such gatherings could prevent minor problems from escalating into major conflicts. Positive family relationships can develop when parents and children learn to work together to resolve issues.

***What do I do when my child will not carry through with what I have asked her to do? And how can I avoid repeating myself over and over again?***

When you want your child to do something or listen to what you have to say, make sure you have her attention. You should be looking at her, and she should be looking directly at you. Tell her what you want her to do and when you want it done. Then have her repeat back what you have said. Make your expectations and consequences explicit.

***What do I do if my child always feels like I am attacking him or accusing him of something?***

It is important for you to communicate concerns to your child in a non-threatening manner. Using “I” messages is a positive method of letting him know how you feel without blaming him. By using “I” messages instead of blaming statements, you can start a conversation and resolve conflicts instead of creating more problems.

***Blaming:*** “You embarrassed me when you acted up at your grandparents. Don’t you have any sense?!”

vs.

***“I” Message:*** “I am embarrassed when you \_\_\_\_\_ around your grandparents. If you need my attention, let’s talk about other ways you can join in the conversation or activity.”

***Blaming:*** “You were out until 2 a.m., and you

are in big trouble. I don’t want to hear any excuses either!”

vs.

***“I” Message:*** “I worry about you when you are late coming home. I want you to call next time if you are going to be late.”

### **Conclusion**

Words, voice, tone, attitude, posture, circumstances and time all play a significant part in the way we get our messages across to our children. Communication is an interaction, and it is impossible to predict how a conversation will turn out. However, by thinking through what you are going to say and how you are going to say it, you can increase the likelihood of obtaining a positive response from your child.

It is sometimes difficult to break old patterns and start new ones. When you are speaking with your child, you are expressing your ideas and beliefs. If you communicate with your child in a loving and respectful manner, he or she will be more likely to communicate with you in the same way.

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*Carolyn Roof, M.A., is a counselor at Mill Creek Elementary School, Columbia, Missouri.*

*Thomas Schreiber, Ph.D., Mid-Mo Mental Health Center, Columbia, Missouri*



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***Missouri School Counselor Association***

3340 American Avenue, Suite F Jefferson City, Missouri 65109

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