
Communicating Within Your Family

Communication—like a dance

Some people think of communication as a beautiful dance. It's so smooth. They can predict their partner's next steps by looking into their eyes.

Still, sometimes the steps aren't so smooth. You may be ready for a nice slow waltz when your child is "jamming" to a heavy metal beat. What do you do when communication falls apart?



First, realize that all families have communication problems. Children and parents have their own personalities. They think, talk, and express themselves differently. It takes work to communicate so everyone understands.

Next, don't give up! Communication is important. It builds a sense of belonging to your family. People, in all types of families, must communicate to:

- make plans
- share feelings and ideas
- think about hopes and dreams
- build trust and a sense of belonging
- solve problems

Getting back in step

Active listening

Sometimes it can be easier to make decisions for children than to listen to their ideas. But it's important to listen to children and to solve problems together. By listening, we show children their ideas and abilities are important.

Listening sounds simple, but "active listening" can be hard. Think about this example. You're trying to get dinner ready. Suddenly your 12-year-old daughter storms into the house. As she slams the front door, she screams, "I hate school!" Then she stomps into the living room and turns the TV up full blast.

You may feel angry at her actions. But before you react, wait. Right now, listening is probably more important than talking. Listening will help you find out just what the problem is.

When your daughter is ready to talk, try these active listening tips:

- Turn off the TV, sit across from your child, and look into her eyes. Give her your full attention.
- When you listen, try to identify the facts of the situation and the feelings of your child.

For example, you may find out that your daughter did poorly on a quiz in school. She didn't know about the quiz. So, she didn't read the chapter. Those are the facts.

How is she feeling? She may be confused because she had the assignment wrong. She may feel angry and disappointed at her own failure. She may be embarrassed and nervous about how you'll react.

As you continue to talk with your daughter, keep the following tips in mind.

- Try not to interrupt. If you're confused, ask your child to explain it again. "I'm not sure I understand. Can you explain again why you weren't ready for the quiz?"
- Don't try to think of a solution or a "comeback." Just listen.
- Don't be judgmental. You may feel angry or disappointed. Still, save your judgment. It can stop communication.
- Watch your child's eyes and body. These will give clues to what she is feeling. Does she have slumped shoulders? Is she looking nervously away?
- Use eye contact. Nod from time to time to show your child you're listening.

Now it's your turn

- Start by stating the facts. To make sure you understand, state the facts as you understand them, then put your child's feelings into words. For example, say, "For some reason, you didn't know about the assignment. So, you weren't ready for the quiz." (facts) "It sounds like you're confused. Maybe you're worried about what I'll do about your poor grade." (feelings)
- Attack the problem, not your child. Try to understand how the problem developed. In this example, it's not just the poor grade. Your child was confused about the assignment. Who owns the problem? Can your child work this out for herself? Or, is it a problem for parents? Should you talk to her teacher?
- Try to guide your child with your words. Encourage her to talk to her teacher to find out if she can make up the grade, Or ask questions to help her develop a plan. "Do you think you could have forgotten the assignment? How could you keep this from happening again?" You may offer a plan. "Would it help to get a notebook to write down your assignments?"
- Use "I messages." Talk about how the problem affects you. "I feel concerned when you are having trouble at school. I want you to do well."

Communication: more than what you say

It's also how you say it.

- It's your facial expression - surprised, angry, disapproving.
- It's your posture - tired shoulders, sitting straight, body leaning toward your child.
- It's your tone of voice - an angry whisper, an excited call.

It's when and where you say it.

- In a loud voice as you're running out the door.
- At the dinner table when everyone is relaxed.
- During a quiet time, just before bed.

It's what you don't say, but should take the time to say.

- "It's ok, I forgive you."
- "We all make mistakes."
- "I'm sorry."
- "I love you."

When communication breaks down

If you still feel you're not communicating well in your family, think about these barriers. Are they getting in the way?

- Forgetting to listen to both facts and feelings
- Jumping to conclusions
- Giving a double message, for example, when your words say one thing but your body movements and actions show another
- Setting rules that are too strict or too easy-going
- Forgetting to consider your child's development, e.g., expecting too much or too little from your child
- Ordering - telling children to do something without allowing them to have a say
- Threatening - holding a punishment over their heads
- Preaching - telling children what they "should" or "ought" to do
- Lecturing - talking to or at your child, not with your child
- Judging - criticizing your child
- Name-calling
- Diverting - distracting yourself or your children from the problem

Working it all out

Sometimes it helps to divide problems into steps. You can use the following steps to solve problems. Teach your children to use them as well.

1. Determine the problem. Sometimes there is more than one. For example, 8-year-old Alberto is complaining. He doesn't want to go to baseball practice. What is the real problem? Is he nervous because he doesn't know the other kids on his team? Is he afraid of a verbally-abusive coach?
2. Brainstorm with your child. Think of some solutions. Come up with as many as you can. Don't worry if they're good ideas or not. What are some solutions for the example above? Your child might quit the baseball team. He may talk to the coach. Or, he may get to know the other kids by asking them to a cook-out.
3. Decide with your child what ideas aren't realistic. Take them off the list. For example, Alberto loves baseball. He doesn't want to drop off the team.

4. Think about the outcomes or consequences for the rest of the ideas. What could happen if he talked to the coach or had the kids for a cook-out?
5. Choose the best idea or solution and make a plan.
6. Put the plan into action. It might help to practice or role play with children. For example, Alberto might think of some things to talk about with his teammates at a cook-out.
7. How did the solution work? Were you or your child successful? What changes are necessary?

Family meetings can build communication

Now you have some ideas for listening, talking, and working through problems. Still, you must find time to communicate together.

Picture this. You are rushing home from work. You're thinking of making a simple meal and getting some clothes washed. Your 9-year-old had a great soccer game today. He wants you to go out for ice cream to celebrate! And, your 6-year-old wants you to play dolls with her. Different steps, different rhythms. Family meetings can help bring it all together.

Pick a time when you can meet together with everyone in your home. Meet at that time every week to discuss family issues or problems. Dinner hour is a special time for many families. Still, it's not a good time to talk about issues that cause anger or hurt feelings.

Meetings can determine what is important in your family

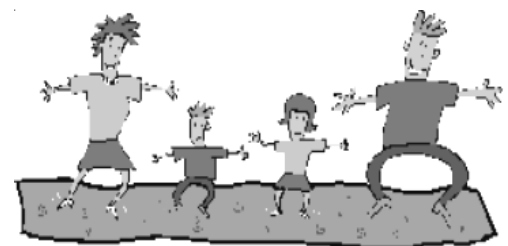
Here are some ways you can use family meetings to improve communication.

- Make family decisions.
- Organize schedules.
- Plan family trips and fun times together.
- Divide up family chores.
- Set rules, and the consequences and rewards that go with them.

Work to solve conflicts. Remember to use the problem solving steps listed above.

Here are some tips for successful meetings.

- Hold meetings at a time when everyone is relaxed.
- Allow enough time so you're not rushed.
- Keep the meetings brief.
- Respect everyone's idea. All ideas are important.
- As a parent, be a leader and not a boss.
- List issues family members want to discuss before you start the meeting.
- Listen with an open mind.



- Try to find solutions that satisfy everyone.
- Use your communication skills, such as active listening and “I messages.”

Communicating well takes patience, hard work, and lots of practice. But good communication is possible. It is an important key to happy, well functioning families.

Sources

Family Communication. University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.
 Family Focus: Parenting the School Age Child (2001). University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.
 Nelson, P. Solo Parenting. University of Delaware Cooperative Extension.

*Fact sheet developed by Mary W. Temke, UNH Cooperative Extension Human Development Specialist,
 with help from University of New Hampshire graduate students Wendy Walsh and Rebecca Carman.
 Updated 5/06 by Emily M. Douglas, UNH Extension Family Education and Policy Specialist*

UNH Cooperative Extension County Office Telephone Numbers

Belknap Laconia (603) 527-5475	Carroll Center Ossipee (603) 539-3331	Cheshire Keene (603) 352-4550	Coos Lancaster (603) 788-4961	Grafton North Haverhill (603) 787-6944
Hillsborough Goffstown (603) 641-6060	Merrimack Boscawen (603) 796-2151 or (603) 225-5505	Rockingham Brentwood (603) 679-5616	Strafford Dover (603) 749-4445	Sullivan Newport (603) 863-9200

Visit our website: ceinfo.unh.edu

UNH Cooperative Extension programs and policies are consistent with pertinent Federal and State laws and regulations on non-discrimination regarding age, color, handicap, national origin, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, or veterans status.