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Herbert G. Lingren

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Lingren, Herbert G., "NF98-383 Improve Communication for Better Understanding" (1998). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension*. 275.

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Published by Cooperative Extension, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Improve Communication for Better Understanding

By Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

Open communication between all members of the family is very important when high stress is present regardless of its source. In order to have greater family togetherness and to facilitate problem-solving, good listening and being willing to share thoughts and feelings is critical. Here is some advice on family communication.

Open Communication During Stressful Times

- **Talk less and listen more.** We're often so busy thinking what we're going to say next, we don't listen to what others are saying to us. We do this with our families also – anticipating what spouses or children are going to say and interrupting or reacting even before they say it. With younger children who take a long time to put their thoughts into words, our impulse is to hurry them along, finish sentences for them or put words into their mouth. We need to listen to our kids (and other family members) and acknowledge that we have heard and understood what they are saying.
- **Know when to talk.** Most people, including children, don't like to talk about a problem when they are tired, worried, hungry or busy. While each family is different, certain times seem more conducive to communication than others. When kids are settled into bed is probably the most comfortable time for cozy chats. And remember that school-age kids are not always so open about telling you what's on their minds. You need to hang out with them for awhile before they'll tell you something is bothering them. Even the busiest working parents should try to find time to just "be with" a school-age or adolescent child. It doesn't have to be a scheduled occasion. Doing chores together can be an opportunity for a relaxed interaction – but save the comments about how well the job is being done.
- **Try having family meetings.** Family meetings are a good way to practice problem-solving skills, promote communication and build family unity. When a plan is discussed and agreed on in a meeting, family members feel a sense of "ownership" and are more likely to comply with the plan. Also, children are able to see their family working together as a group. They can feel stronger and

smarter in the group – in a way they cannot experience as individuals. Regularly scheduled meetings might deal with daily decisions such as who will drive the kids to sports practice or how chores are to be distributed. One-time meetings might be called for a specific purpose such as planning a vacation or solving a problem such as how to make Grandma's visit more comfortable for everyone or clearing the air after a crisis or squabble.

Occasionally one member of the family will not talk, or share feelings about a stressful event. Taking a positive approach will help. It is important that both the talker and listener feel "safe" for open communications to occur.

Talk It Out During Tough Times

During times of hardships, it is critical that family members discuss what is going on and develop ideas to cope constructively. Developing these skills can usually help improve communication and reduce the intensity of conflicts.

- ***Use the speaker-listener technique*** so each side knows he or she will have a chance to be heard. First, decide what you will talk about, who will be the speaker and who will be the listener. To practice keeping your roles straight, get a piece of paper and write ***floor*** on it. Trade the "floor" back and forth, remembering to speak only when you have the floor. The speaker should keep his or her statements short so the listener can follow them.
- ***Relate first and resolve second.*** Relating to your partner and resolving problems are both important goals. To do this effectively, you must connect with each other. To show you are listening, relating and trying to understand the full importance of what your partner is saying, take in the partner's message, try to sense his or her feelings, and then restate a mixture of those thoughts and feelings. Ask if your understanding has been correct. If not, ask partner to repeat the parts you misunderstood.
- ***Don't apologize or offer an explanation*** or excuse until after you have shown you appreciate your partner's feelings. Even honest apologies and explanations detract attention from the speaker. The listener should show respect for the speaker's feelings and try not to dilute them by waving an apology or explanation at them. The listener must accept the possibility that he or she did something the speaker didn't like, even if it wasn't on purpose. The listener must develop a sense of confidence in taking turns, knowing that her or his position will be given equal time as soon as the speaker and listener roles switch.
- ***Don't blame or attack.*** Your problems are between the two of you—they are relationship problems. Look at your role in the problem, not your partner's.
- ***Set aside a weekly half-hour meeting.*** Even if you get very busy, at least you know that a time has been set aside for the relationship.
- ***Setting up a separate talk.*** If one partner would like to discuss an issue outside the time of the half-hour meeting, he or she should say "*I'd like to talk about X. Is this a good time?*"

The other partner has the right to decline to talk at that moment, but it becomes his/her responsibility to make sure the talk happens within 24 hours.

- ***During a discussion, focus on one problem.*** Stay on one subject at a time, even though your thoughts may drift to related issues. Ask yourself what your discussion goals are.

- ***Reserve the right to take a break if the discussion is not going well.*** If one side starts to attack, blame or escalate, either partner can call a "stop action." At that point, agree to stop talking and pick up the conversation within 24 hours.

File NF383 under: FAMILY LIFE

F-12, Relationships

Issued September 1998

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

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