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Communicating with Young Children
Communicating with Young Children

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Communicating with children involves the exchange of words, ideas, and feelings. We communicate with looks—scowls and smiles, with actions—slaps and hugs, with silence—warm or cold, as well as with words—kind and unkind. Communication includes the content—what is communicated as well as the method—how it is communicated.

Adults usually do not have any difficulty communicating with children when it simply involves giving directions on how to use scissors or explaining the danger of cars, but they do have difficulty communicating when feelings are involved—either the child's or their own.

Good communication leads to warm relationships, cooperation, and feelings of worth. Poor communication leads to kids who "turn off" adults, conflicts and bickering, and feelings of worthlessness.

How to Communicate Successfully

Here are some successful ways of talking with children. Try them out. But remember, what works well for one person may not work for another. If these suggestions are not successful, try other ways of communicating based on your own experience and understanding of your child.
Communicate Acceptance

When children know they are accepted just as they are, it is possible for them to grow, to change, and to feel good about themselves. When children feel good about themselves, they are likely to get along well with others.

Accepting children just as they are makes communicating with them easy. Children who feel accepted will be more likely to share personal feelings and problems. When adults threaten, command, preach, or lecture, children may likely feel, "I don't count," "I'm bad," "You don't like me," or "I can't do anything right."

For example, Larry says, "Mother, I'm afraid to sleep alone." Which response encourages communication?
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- "You ought to be ashamed! You're acting like a big baby! You know there is nothing to be scared of!"
- "I know you are frightened. I will turn on the night light and leave the door open for you."

Remember: Adults can accept children without necessarily approving of their behavior. For example, we love and accept Sandra, but we do not accept her behavior when she slaps the baby or pulls the cat's tail.

Use Door Openers

Door openers are invitations to say more, to share ideas and feelings. They tell children that you are really listening and interested, that their ideas are important, and that you accept them and respect what they are saying.

Some examples of door openers are expressions like:
- "I see."
- "Tell me more."
- "Oh?"
- "Say that again. I want to be sure I understand you."
- "Mm hmmm."
- "No kidding?"
- "How about that?"
- "That's interesting."
- "Really?"
Listen Attentively

Get rid of as many distractions as possible and pay close attention to what the child is saying. At times adults may need to stop whatever they are doing and listen to the child. It is difficult to run the vacuum cleaner, cook dinner, or read the paper and at the same time pay close attention to what the child is saying.

Caution: Do not pretend that you are listening when you aren't. If you are busy—talking on the telephone or entertaining guests—tell the child, "I'm busy now, but let's talk about that later," and be specific about when. Then be sure to follow through.

Use "You-Messages"

"You-messages" describe your perceptions of the child's feelings and will often encourage the expression of troublesome feelings. Use them to reflect the child's ideas and feelings.

For example:
"I think you are sad because your dog died."
"Are you upset because you didn't win the game?"
"I feel that you are angry because Jenny wouldn't let you play with her new doll baby."

When children are allowed to express bad feelings freely, those feelings will often disappear like magic. Hiding bad feelings is self-destructive. They do not disappear; they can lead to self-hate, headaches, ulcers, and violent actions.

Remember: Feelings are for real, and their existence, whether negative or positive, must be recognized. Feelings honestly expressed can then be handled effectively.
Use More Do's Than Don'ts

Tell the child what to do rather than what not to do. Using "do's" rather than "don'ts" can be very difficult, especially if adults already have the "don't" habit. It is very difficult to break bad habits. Using "do's" rather than "don'ts" requires much thought and practice. However, the improvement in your relationship with your child will make it worth the effort.

**The Don'ts**
- Don't drag your coat on the ground.
- Don't squeeze the kitten.
- Don't slam the door.
- Don't draw on the table.

**The Do's**
- Hold your coat so it doesn't drag.
- Carry the kitten gently.
- Close the door softly, please.
- You can color on this page.

Talk to children with the same amount and kind of consideration that you demand of others when they speak with you.

Talk with, Not At

Talking "at" children is one-sided conversation, such as, "Put on your raincoat," "You are going to spill that," or "You need a haircut." Adults who talk "at" children often use the excuse that small children cannot converse at the adult's level. But no one, including youngsters, likes to be talked "at." You may talk "at" the family dog, or even a tiny baby, but try to talk "with" a young child.

Talking "with" children is a two-way conversation—talking to them and then listening to what they have to say. Forming the habit of talking "with" children rather than "at" them will be especially helpful when they become teenagers.
Use "I-Messages"

"I-messages" are statements of personal feeling. They are an effective way of letting children know how you feel about them and their behavior. Which sounds better?

"I-Message"

I need help in picking up now.
I don't feel like reading a story when I'm tired.
I sure get upset when I see mud on the floor.
I can't hear you with all that screaming.
I don't understand.

"You-Message"

You sure made a mess.
You're a pest.
You ought to be ashamed!
You better shut-up!
You're dumb.

"I-messages" give children responsibility for changing their own behavior. For example, if the adult says, "I see a dirt smudge on your face," the child is being given the responsibility to do something about the smudge.

Caution: Avoid using "I-messages" to express anger to children. Expressing anger may cause a young child to feel very upset and insecure. Instead of expressing anger, express the emotion which came before the anger. For example, if Bruce knocked over his glass of milk when the family had company for dinner, embarrassment probably came before anger. Say, "I am really embarrassed when you make such a mess." Don't say, "I'm really mad at you."
Make Requests Simple

Young children have a hard time remembering several orders at a time. Remember when you asked for directions in a strange city? You were probably confused when told to "go six blocks, turn left and go past the gray slate building, turn right at the third blinker, go south and circle the courthouse." Three-year-old Sarah will be just as confused when you say, "Go to your room and hang up your clothes but first pick up your toys and put the dog out." Probably Sarah and the dog will both disappear outdoors because "put the dog out" is all Sarah remembers.

Get the Child's Attention First

Children tend to concentrate on only one thing at a time. Call the child by name and allow time to get his or her attention before you speak.

For example:
• "Jack." (Wait until he stops throwing the ball and looks at you.) "Dinner will be ready in 15 minutes."
• "Jill." (Wait until she stops playing in the sand and looks at you.) "It will be time to come inside in 10 minutes."
Give Instructions Clearly and Firmly

Say what you mean and mean what you say. There is a difference between telling a child to do thus or so, and asking or making a request of them to do thus or so. The child has no choice when told. But, when asked, by the nature of asking a question, the child has the choice of saying yes or no. And, the adult should be prepared to take a no as well as a yes answer from the child.

Say "Please," "Thank You," "You’re Welcome"

Children deserve the common courtesies which adults use with each other. And children learn by imitating the speech and behavior of adults. Let them learn to say "Please" and "Thank you" by imitating you. Nagging a child to say "Please" sets a bad example; it is not courteous.

Communicate at Eye Level

Eye contact improves communication. When talking with very young children, it is desirable to stoop down to their level or to sit at a table with them. Adults fail to realize the effect their size has on small children. How would you feel if a 10-foot-tall giant shook his finger and glared at you?
Avoid Interrupting or Scolding

Jeanie came in quite excited and started to tell Mother about the good time she had playing at Betty's house. Mother interrupted Jeanie, rudely and at great length, to scold her for going to Betty's house without permission. Jeanie immediately lost interest in sharing her feelings with Mother. Mother certainly should remind Jeanie of the rule about asking permission, but at another time.

Avoid Unkind Words

Unkind words have unhappy results. They tear down the child and cut off communication. Avoid unkind words that are:
- Ridiculing—"You're acting like a big baby."
- Shaming—"I'm ashamed of you."
- Name-calling—"You're a bad boy."

Unkind words, spoken without even thinking of their results, make children feel disliked. They discourage children and give them a poor concept of themselves. More important, unkind words do not help. They only make matters worse.
Use Kind Words

Kind words bring happy results! They give children more self-confidence and help them behave better, try harder, and achieve more. They communicate love and respect and create an atmosphere in which problems can be discussed openly and understandings reached. Suppose the child has spilled milk on the floor. You can say, "Don't be so clumsy! Just look at the mess you made"—which leads to unhappy results. Or you can say, "Here is a sponge. Please wipe the milk up"—with happy results.

Some examples of kind words:
- "Thank you for helping me clean off the table."
- "You did a good job of washing the dishes."
- "That really makes me feel good."
- "I love you."
- "I like the way you remembered to hang up your coat."

Good Communication Is Important

Good communication helps children develop confidence, feelings of self-worth, and good relationships with others. It makes life with them more pleasant now and helps them grow into adults who have good feelings about themselves and others. The following self-test is a chance to apply the information discussed to your own family.
Self-Test

1. Translate the DON'Ts into DO's (Show the child what he or she can do).

   Don'ts
   Don't run in the store.
   Don't yell at me.
   Don't talk with your mouth full.
   Don't throw the ball in the house.
   Don't touch that.

   Do's

2. Change these statements to "you-messages."

   Child                      Parent
   "You're mean. You let       "I'm tired of
   Terry stay up later         listening to you
   than me."                   argue with me."

   "I hate Paul."             "No, you don't.
   It's bad to hate            It's bad to hate
   people."                   people."

   You-Message
3. Respond to these situations with "I-messages."
   a. Johnny crossed the street to play without permission.
   b. Ann drops jelly-bread on the new living room rug—disobeying the rule that foods must be eaten in the kitchen.
   c. Teacher reports that Barry got in a fight at kindergarten.
   d. Children fight and jump around in back of the car during the drive to Grandmother’s house.

4. Keep a record for one day of the things you say to a child when:
   • It is time to pick up toys.
   • You think enough TV has been watched.
   • You take a trip to the supermarket.
   • The child "bugs" you when you are very busy.

5. Estimate the number of times during the day that you say:
   No  Quit that
   Don’t Cut that out
   Stop  You know better

6. Ask another person to tape record 10 minutes of your conversation with a child—when you are not aware that your conversation is being taped. Listen to the tape and evaluate your tone of voice.