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EC69-1011 Family Communication

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FAMILY COMMUNICATION

ROBERTA C. FRASIER

AS WE LISTEN to people talk, we hear all kinds of evidence that there are breakdowns in communications. We hear statements such as these:

"I didn't know he felt that way."

"If I'd only realized how important this was to him."

"I can't talk to my parents about this."

Research studies indicate that communication between husbands and wives tends to decline through the years. Studies also suggest that continuing to talk together and listening to what each other says is important in maintaining a marriage in which husband and wife keep up with one another's growth and development.

Marriage counselors have learned that a breakdown in communications between partners is one part of marriage failure. Durable marriages can be enriched by improved sharing. Parent-child relations can be strengthened by communication which enables children and parents to better understand one another. Each of us can improve in his ability to communicate with family members.

Before you read further, check your own communication pattern.

If your child made these statements to you, what would be your most likely response:

- a. Johnny: "I hate you! You're the meanest mother in town!"
- b. Sally: "Oh mother, the most wonderful

thing happened. I'm in love with Tom..."

- c. Peter: "You know how Miss B. spends half the class time digging in her purse? Boy, did we have a ball today. We found a dead mouse on the way to school and we dropped it in her purse. You should have heard her yell!"

Check any of these statements which you can hear yourself saying:

- a. Can't you ever be quiet?
- b. How do you feel about it?
- c. He doesn't understand how I feel about it.
- d. But I've told you a dozen times.
- e. How does it look to you?
- f. They don't pay any attention unless I yell at them.
- g. Sometimes I think you don't hear a word I'm saying.
- h. Why did you do that?
- i. It's a closed issue; we won't talk about it any more.
- j. Don't argue with me!

Now that you've checked yourself, let's think what we mean by the word communication. It is a word which has many different meanings. One meaning is to impart--to give to another. A broader meaning is that communication is sharing, or an interchange of thoughts. When we think of communication within the family, we think of the broader definitions. Intra-family communication is a way of sharing, of receiving as well as sending. It is a bridge to understanding.

How do we communicate?

We communicate in many ways. But as we think about family communication, three ways are of particular concern to us.

Word communication

All of us are aware of "talk" as a way to communicate with others. Children say, "Yak, yak, yak--that's all you do from morning to night." Some of us never run down; others use words sparingly. Some of us talk to others; others talk "to hear themselves talking." We talk as a way of expressing our own anxieties and as a way to relieve tension.

There are great individual differences in the way people use speech. Although the kind of stimulation a child receives in the family affects the development of speech, some children seem to be more talkative than others from the very beginning. Girls tend to start talking earlier than boys and do more of it throughout life. However, this is probably not an innate difference, but caused by the way we respond to girls in comparison to boys. Little boys are expected to grow up to be strong, silent men. This cultural value influences the way we bring up our children.

Speech patterns not only vary with the individual, but are regional as well. New Englanders are noted for their sparing use of speech. In the delightful book, Vermont Is Where You Find It, one elderly farmer is pictured sitting on the front porch, looking at his wife and musing, "When I think of what you have meant to me for all these years, sometimes it's more than I can stand not to tell you so." People from other sections of the country may be noted for their "gift o' gab." Southerners have a reputation for "flowery" speech. Texans are accused of having a tendency toward exaggeration. The phrase, "Irish blarney" refers to a special characteristic of Irish speech.

In order to understand speech as a way of communication, it is necessary to look at family backgrounds, family values, and cultural expectations. We must recognize individual differences in practice and in value.

Problems with words

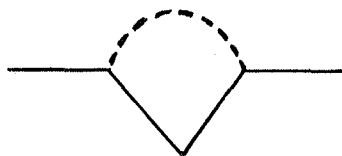
Words have some drawbacks as a form of communication because they have many different meanings. We can't assume that words have the same meaning to others that they do to us. Someone has said that the meaning is in people, not in the word itself. Humpty Dumpty expressed this idea when he said, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose to mean, neither more nor less." Because words are

symbols, "verbal" or "word" communication leads to as much misunderstanding as it does to understanding. If we recognize this, we'll try to find out how the other person receives the words we send out. We will listen to what the words appear to mean to him.

Words are emotionally tinged. They bring out or stimulate feelings in people. Because they set off a feeling tone, we don't listen, or else we interpret in terms of the feelings we have.

Words cannot be taken at face value. They are also used to cover up or disguise what we really feel or mean. The old phrase, "whistling in the dark" is a good illustration. The little boy who says, "I'm not scared," is probably telling you that he really is frightened. The person who says, "I don't care if they don't invite me, it's all right with me," is probably saying, "I really do care."

Another problem with word communication is that we listen faster than people can talk. Most people talk at about 125 words per minute, but we are able to listen at a rate of about 400 words per minute. This means that we think ahead of the person who is speaking to us. This causes us to make "ice cream cones" as we go along. We are listening, and then our mind goes off in a different direction. Soon we come back and fill in our own meaning. This is one reason why people hear different things at the same meeting. We call this making "ice cream cones" because the listening pattern can be diagramed this way:



If we can learn to recognize this "ice cream cone"-making tendency in ourselves and others, we will be able to communicate better. This phenomenon happens with young and old, in our homes as well as in meetings.

Body communication

Before a baby can talk he is able to communicate with others. He sends out his messages by crying, smiling, gurgling, stiffening his little body, and tensing his tummy muscles.

Adults also send out messages with their bodies. A handclasp can convey a world of meaning to another person. An arm around the shoulder or a warm friendly hug send out a special message at a special time.

Eyes reflect feelings. "Twinkly" or "smiling eyes" convey feeling toward other people. Four-year-old Dickie observed his nursery school teacher in her work with his classmate. Later he said, "You were sure mad at him, weren't you?" When asked what made him think the teacher was feeling mad, he said, "Your eyes looked mad." Eyes may convey more feelings than words.

Red spots appear on the necks of some people when they become angry inside or embarrassed. These "spots" are the way their bodies react to strong feelings. They are telling us that this is something about which the person feels strongly, even though he may appear unruffled on the surface.

Tightly clenched hands send out messages. Perspiring hands or clammy hands may be sending a message.

A change in voice tone or speed of talking give us clues and indicate that a person is feeling something other than what he is saying. A "trembly" chin, tense lips, a smile, are all ways bodies convey messages. It is said a smile is a universal language. But not all smiles mean friendliness; some are forced, others reflect genuine feeling.

Children are masters at the art of reading body communication. Since they exist at the mercy of adults, it is necessary for them to learn "to read" the messages adults send with their bodies. Adults tend to lose this sensitivity as they grow older, but a little practice in observation can sharpen this skill.

Action communication

We communicate by the way we act or behave toward others. Behavior has been described as the unspoken language of children. Sensitivity to the behavior of people is an important aid in communication.

Wives and mothers convey their love by doing for the family, by making home a pleasant place for family members. They express their feelings through doing the laundry, clean-

ing, and all the other things necessary to keep a home operating. Husbands express their feelings and communicate their love by providing for the family.

However, those on the receiving end of the action often perceive a different message than the sender intended. For example, the wife may see the remembrance of her birthday as a symbol of love and overlook the message the husband is sending 365 days of the year.

Parents show their love for children by taking responsibility for their care, and by setting limits necessary for their protection and their growth into responsible adulthood. Children often interpret these acts as interference or rejection.

Buddy, the Dotty Dripple comic strip character, expressed this when he said, "Daddy, why do people hate their little boys and send them to bed early?" "We don't hate you, Buddy, your mother and I love you very much." "You mean you like to be with me?" "Of course, we do." "Then I'll stay up and watch TV with you."

Of course we aren't implying that Mother and Daddy should fall into this trap, but the story does express the idea that our message is not always received in the way in which we send it.

Not only do parents communicate to children by their actions, but children communicate to parents by their behavior. The child who misbehaves is telling us something. The youngster who runs away or fights, the one who can never accept defeat, who always has to be first, who acts "flip," or who appears not to care, is sending out messages. The meaning may be obscure to us but he's trying to communicate his feelings.

We communicate with others by our words, with our bodies, and by our behavior. Communication involves receiving as well as sending. Unfortunately, the message is often received with a garbled meaning. To improve our communication, we have to put as much emphasis on what the other person is receiving as we do on what we are sending. We cannot communicate effectively until we learn to read the signals sent back to us. Most of us are so busy sending that we never stop to find out what, if anything, has been received. Finding

out what message has been received is a vital part of communication.

How can communication within the family be improved?

Learn to listen and listen to learn

A teenager said, "Parents are people who try to help you but don't know you well enough to do so."

A younger child said, "Grownups never really listen to what children have to say. They always decide ahead of time."

We can improve our communication if we listen to the unpleasant as well as the pleasant. Have you ever noticed how differently we respond to unpleasant things than to pleasant ones? If someone praises us, we think he has good judgment. If he criticizes us, we take it with a "grain of salt" or assume "his nose is out of joint," or he's not feeling well that day.

If Mary says, "Mommy, I love you; I'm so glad you're my mother," we beam and assume she means what she says. But if she says, "Mommy, I hate you; you're the meanest mother in town," we are likely to say, "You don't really mean that" or, "Don't ever let me hear you say that again!"

We tend to shut off those comments which are unpleasant. However, we can learn as much and perhaps more from the negative as from the positive expression of feelings. It's important to communicate unpleasant as well as pleasant feelings. We have to learn the things we do which upset family and friends if we are to improve our relationships with them. Perhaps it's important for mother to recognize that at this moment Mary believes her to be the meanest mother in town. It may improve understanding if mother can listen and find out why Mary feels this way. Mary may need help to find a better way to express her hostile feelings, but "bad" feelings are every bit as real as "good" feelings. Allowing the expression of all kinds of feelings recognizes that feelings are facts. Feelings need to be expressed in some acceptable way, even though actions must be limited. Allowing honesty of expression improves communication.

This idea is not intended to convey approval

of saying how one feels at all times. It is intended to emphasize the importance of learning to express negative feelings in a socially acceptable way. A child who is still in the formative stages expresses himself more directly than does a grownup. After his feelings have been made known and accepted as his own, then a parent can discuss with him a better way of expressing himself. It is only at this point that teaching can be effective.

Listen sensitively. Being a sensitive listener involves focusing on the other person. It means listening for what the person is trying to tell you. It means looking for clues for meanings behind the words. Sometimes a person's behavior and his body convey a different message than his words. Sometimes words cannot be taken at face value. The person who says, "I'm not a bit worried," may be giving you some other clues. The very fact that he has to deny worry gives you a clue. Why would he mention it if he weren't thinking about it? The sensitive listener is alert to clues for meaning behind words.

Listen without judging. Often when some member of our family tells us something we say, "Why did you do that?" "You know better than that." We act as an investigator or a cross-examiner. If we want to improve our understanding and keep open lines of communication, we need to learn to listen without judging. Otherwise, we shut off sharing and only teach others what it is safe to tell us. Sometimes we teach children to lie by "jumping on them" when they tell us about some behavior which is objectionable to us.

Listening without judging does not mean that we are condoning the person's actions or the actions of others. It means that we are learning and storing up in our minds those areas in which we need to strengthen our teaching at a later, more appropriate time.

Listen to yourself as well as others

It's much easier to learn to listen to others than it is to listen to ourselves. But, if we're going to improve our communication we also have to learn to listen to ourselves. We can do this in retrospect. There is an old saying, "Foresight is better than hindsight." But, "hindsight" can be as important as "foresight" if we learn from it. It is helpful to think back

over what you said in a situation and how others reacted. We can learn from our past behavior. We can learn how others tend to react to certain words and the feelings others have.

If you are constantly being misunderstood, look at the way you've sent your messages. Did you have the attention of the receiver? Was he making ice cream cones?

Sometimes we talk at people so much that they develop a psychological deafness. Children and husbands are particularly susceptible to this disease. It may be their only means of self defense from the continual bombardment of words.

Listen to how you respond to differences of opinion. Do you really accept the fact of individual differences? Do you share your true feelings or do you withhold them?

Observe body and behavior clues

Each person can improve his observation skill and sharpen his perception by becoming aware of the way the body gives clues to feelings.

If you can accept the fact that behavior or actions often mean different things to the individual on the receiving end than to the person who is acting, you are on the way to greater understanding. The person who giggles at a time of crisis is not reflecting humor, but sometimes the person who hears the giggle thinks he is. By the same token, others may not interpret your actions in the same way you do. They don't always know what you mean or what your intentions are.

Many of our misunderstandings are caused by failure in communications. Strengthening communications and sharing of feelings leads to greater understanding.

Effective family living has as part of its firm foundation people who are as concerned with understanding other members of the family as they are with being understood; people who recognize that communication is receiving as well as sending; people who recognize that we communicate by our words, by our bodily expressions, by our behavior, and in many other ways.

Improved communication will pay dividends in effective family living today and in teaching children to live more effectively tomorrow in the world beyond the home.

You can improve your communication score by:

1. Learning to listen, and listening to learn.
2. Listening to yourself.
3. Observing body and behavioral clues.

Now that you have been thinking about ways to improve communication, test yourself by checking the response which you think would most likely lead to future sharing of feelings or experiences.

"Don't be ridiculous, you're too young to know what love is."
"How can you tell?"
"You'll get over it."
"It's just puppy love."

"Peter, you couldn't have. You'll call her right now and apologize."
"What ever made you do a thing like that?"
"What happened next?"
"I'm ashamed of you. You know better than that!"

After you have checked your responses, read the pamphlet again and see if family communication would be improved by your responses.

A child speaks

1. Johnny: "I hate you! You're the meanest mother in town!"
2. Sally: "Oh mother, the most wonderful thing happened. I'm in love with Tom..."
3. Peter: "You know how Mrs. B. spends half the class time digging in her purse? Boy, did we have a ball today. We found a dead mouse on the way to school and we dropped it in her purse. You should have heard her yell."

A mother responds

"Don't talk to me like that!"
"You don't really mean that!"
"Why do you hate me?"
"Nice boys don't talk that way!"

This leaflet was prepared by Roberta C. Frasier, Extension Family Life Specialist at Oregon State University. Mrs. Frasier was formerly head of the Department of Child Development at Washington State University. The manuscript was reviewed and approved for regional Extension use by the staffs at Oregon State University, the University of Idaho, and Washington State University. Permission from Oregon State University for the leaflet to be reprinted by the Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service was secured by Agnes L. Arthaud, Asst. Director, Home Economics Extension. Further information on this subject can be secured by contacting Miss Arthaud.