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Encouraging Good Communication with Children

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Parents play the most important role in building communication skills in their children. Children develop communication habits by the way they see parents interacting with others. Parents who listen and speak with patience, interest, and attention prove to be the best teachers of listening and give their children the greatest audience in the world.



Listening Skills

Listening is a learned skill and an essential part of the communication exchange with your child. It is important to model good listening skills when your child is communicating via verbal messages (questions, requests) or nonverbal ones (actions or non-actions). You will be setting a good example for your children, and help them to become active listeners.

Active listening is the central component of communication. When parents are active listeners, other people may describe them as having good intuition and as being “tuned in” to their children. The process of active listening will help your child understand feelings and be less afraid of the negative ones. It will also allow them the opportunity to talk about and solve their own problems as well as gain more control over behavior and emotions.

To become an active listener...



- Set aside time to listen and block out distractions as much as possible. Encourage your child to talk directly to you so you may model the habits of good listening.



- Some parents and children find they can communicate best just before bedtime or when they share an evening snack.



- Maintain eye contact while your child talks. When your child speaks to you, show that you are genuinely interested in their thoughts and feelings.



- Listen to, summarize, and repeat back to your child the message you are hearing.



- Watch for your child’s nonverbal cues including facial expressions, posture, energy level, or changes in behavior patterns. The underlying messages may include the feelings, fears, and concerns of your child such as being scared... sad...angry...happy.



- Accept and show respect for what your child is expressing, even if it does not coincide with your own ideas and expectations. Listen respectfully and do not cut children off before they have finished speaking. Strengthen your child’s confidence by reassuring them that you hear their ideas.



- Do not criticize, judge, or interrupt them while they are speaking. Try to put yourself in your child’s place so you can better understand what he/she is experiencing.



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Talking Techniques

When talking to your child, try to make it a positive dialogue, rather than impose judgment or place blame. Also, as you communicate with your child, be sensitive to your tone of voice. Do not let your emotions confuse the message you are trying to convey. Avoid using “put-down” messages that judge or criticize a child. They might involve name-calling, ridiculing, or embarrassing the child. These messages can have a serious negative impact on the child and on self-esteem. If you communicate the message that your child is bad, inconsiderate, a disappointment, or a failure, that is how he/she is likely to perceive themselves, not only during childhood but for many years thereafter.

Consider using “I” messages rather than “you” messages, especially when attempting to change or encourage certain behavior. “I” messages are statements like “I would like more quiet time when I am trying to read.” With “I” statements, children receive the message in a more positive light. They often say things like “I didn’t realize that the noise I was making was bothering you.” Children often assume more responsible roles if they are made aware of and understand the feelings and needs of others.



By contrast, “you” messages are statements like “You should never do that.” “You make me so angry.” “Why don’t you pay attention?” These messages are more child-focused and are more likely to put a child on the defensive, encourage personal counterarguments, and discourage effective communication.

Be as consistent as possible with all your children. You should have the same communication approach and style with every child, although the unique aspects of each relationship and each child’s temperament may require some modifications. Do not appear to play favorites or be more accepting of one child than another.

Resources:

“Caring for Your School-Age Child: Ages 5 to 12” by American Academy of Pediatrics (2004, Updated 2015) Retrieved 8-18-17 from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/familydynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Components-of-Good-Communication.aspx>

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