

TALKING WITH KIDS

We All Want/Need
To Be Understood



COMMUNICATION IS A SKILL

Isn't it interesting how society has become so advanced that we can share information across the globe, yet we struggle with communication across a room? Parents and children alike comment that the other "never listens," that they repeat themselves, ignore their needs, or say things that prompt feelings of shame or guilt.

Effective communication is as much about the speaker as it is about the listener. We sometimes assume listeners are "checked out," but could it be that we're doing a poor job of engaging them? Who wants to be lectured to after all? Who wants to feel criticized or condemned? Who wants to feel unheard? Kids especially struggle with how best to express negative feelings and sometimes speak or behave disrespectfully, aggressively, and/or immaturely. Part of our role as leaders is to try to access the unspoken message.

Good communication skills make all the difference in our relationships. While a fairly straight-forward skill, many undermine its value and ignore very basic tips for being an effective listener and commanding an attentive audience. Ask yourself if you prioritize the healthy communication tips that follow:

TIPS FOR HEALTHY COMMUNICATION

- Ask how your child views life and the issues you want to discuss. Appreciating his/her point of view, hopes, and intentions goes a long way toward productive discussion.
- Set aside distraction-free time, even if only 15 minutes/week, to sit down and focus on your child
- Select a good time and place for meaningful conversation (private, few distractions). You may have a more captive audience while driving to school or at bedtime.
- It is sometimes best to start a conversation by sharing an appreciation for your child's current feelings (i.e. "You're probably excited about the prom..."). Follow up with questions of curiosity rather than "gotcha" or "why" questions.
- Pay attention to nonverbal cues including eye contact, posture, facial expression, and tone of voice. Avoid looking at a clock or watch while a child is speaking. Ignore phone calls and the newspaper. If your child's facial expression seems 'checked out,' ask lovingly if he/she has something to share or if something you're talking about is upsetting.
- Express appreciation for your child's willingness to communicate, even when you hear difficult things. Don't assume they know what you're thinking/appreciating. Be prepared to talk about their interests. Contrast their interests with your own interests at their age.

- Respond to your child with respect, treating what he/she says as important (e.g., “Thanks for sharing that.”)
- Think about your words; “You did great, but...” is a turn off. Consider your use of the words “why” and “should” when discussing their behavior; these may trigger more shame than positive behavior.
- Consider how you’ve modeled your family values through your own words/actions. Do not put your partner down in front of your child who is 50% a part of each of you. When you put one another down, you’re insulting half of your child’s being.
- Be open to your child’s friends. They may provide information and let you know things your child may be uncomfortable telling you directly. Show interest. Ask questions.
- Maintain open lines of communication. Don’t be afraid to ask about your child’s moods but do so in an empathetic, loving manner, so your child feels it’s ok to discuss whatever is on his/her mind.
- Ask what your child likes/dislikes about how you communicate and the thing you say when communicating. Ask how best he/she absorbs (positive and negative) information. Who better than your child to say?
- “Lecturing” is generally not effective. A meaningful discussion can last hours, but a lecture longer than 60 seconds often results in a child tuning out and potentially rebelling due to feeling talked down to.
- When your child repeats him/herself, this may be a sign that he/she feels you are not listening. When you are repeating yourself, it is a sign that YOU are not using effective communication to engage your child.

DON'T:

Our kids already feel everything that’s wrong with them. Our job is to tell them over and over again what’s right. Remember, they deserve to be heard too. While we usually want to avoid “don’ts” and focus on “do’s,” below are a few “don’ts” worth mentioning.

1. Don’t insult or name-call
2. Don’t tell your child he/she is no good or is a bad person because of his/her actions
3. Don’t tell your child he/she is “too young/ immature/ emotional” to understand
4. Don’t rule by guilt or shame (e.g., reminding your child of everything you’ve done for him/her)
5. Don’t focus on punishment/consequences confrontation

PROACTIVE COMMUNICATION

Follow the steps of an assertiveness model of communication, such as the DESC model below:

1. Describe - Stick to the facts. Don’t blame or make assumptions about others’ thoughts/feeling.
“When I/you ...”
2. Effect - Express your feelings. Use “I statements” about your own emotional reaction to the problem. Don’t imply that another person is responsible for your feelings.
“I feel...” (not “You make me feel...”)
3. Specify - Make your wants known. Ask for a specific behavior change. For example, instead of asking your child who is late to “be more considerate,” ask that he/she call you if more than 5 minutes late.
“I would appreciate if next time...”
4. Consequences - How will you feel if the person does what you request? How will his/her behaviors help you achieve your goal?
“I will feel/we will benefit...”

RESOURCES

notMYkid – www.notmykid.org

HelpGuide.org – Parenting -

<http://www.helpguide.org/topics/parenting.htm>

Community Information & Referral Services

(602) 263 8856

Suicide / Crisis (Maricopa County)

(480) 784 1500

BOOKS

“The Lost Art of Listening”

by Michael P. Nichols

“Between Parent and Child”

by Dr. Haim Ginott & Alice Ginott

“How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk”

by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish

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INSPIRING POSITIVE LIFE CHOICES

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