

Building Strong Families

Tips for Communicating with Children

1. Be supportive through words and actions.

Remember not all messages are verbal. Listen with your eyes. Nonverbal communication, such as a gloomy face, a slammed door, and a laugh are real.

Be interested--express interest through words and body language.

2. Set a good example.

Encourage the child to keep talking by saying such things as: "uh-huh," "hmm, I see," "And what happened then?" Nod your head; look interested.

Do not cut off the child before he or she is finished.

Show empathy--the ability to put yourself in his or her shoes.

3. Listen attentively.

Be available. Children need to feel that you're not too busy to share a joyful experience or good news.

When you and your child are together, select a quiet spot and unhurried time, if possible. Give the child your undivided attention by stopping what you're doing and turning off distractions.

4. Repeat key ideas by restating and clarifying. This is called reflective listening.

- a) paraphrase: "I hear you saying that you are really excited about that new TV show and you would like to watch it;"
- b) make connections: "Do you think your insomnia could have anything to do with your upcoming exams?"
- c) draw generalizations and conclusions and summarize what has been said;

- d) point out inconsistencies: "I hear you saying that you want more freedom and yet you are also saying you want me to make these decisions for you;"
- e) check with the child to make certain you understand him or her correctly.

Use reflective listening when:

- a) You hear or see feelings (sad, puzzled, depressed, angry).
- b) You want to help the person with his or her problem at that time.
- c) You are able to accept his or her feelings, whatever they may be or however different they may be from your own feelings.
- d) You are interested in the other person's needs--and you can accept the other's responses.
- e) You have a deep trust in the child's ability to handle his/her feelings, to work through them and to find solutions to his/her problems.
- f) You are able to see your child as someone separate from you--a unique individual.

Examples of reflective listening:

- a) The child comes in and slams the door. Parent walks over to the child and squats to eye level by him or her. *"Boy, you sound angry! Did something happen outside?"*
- b) The child yells out, *"I hate that stupid teacher of mine."*
"You're really angry with your teacher!"
"Yes. She doesn't ever explain the assignments."
"And that really frustrates you."
"Well, I couldn't understand the math problem and everyone laughed at me."
"You felt really stupid and silly. It really hurt when they laughed at you."

Remember...there are no "shoulds" in feelings. We all have strong feelings. They are neither right nor wrong; they simply are!

Reflective listening helps a child accept his or her feelings as honest and legitimate. When a child's feelings are accepted and respected, the intensity of the feelings can pass. Reflective listening also helps a child reach a deeper level of self-awareness and understanding.

A child finds it difficult to talk reasonably in the heat of anger. Wait for the child to cool down. Sometimes a child will not be in the mood to share problems. An effective listener knows when to back off and say, *"if you want to talk later, I'm available."*