

Communicating Effectively with Children

Children base their views of themselves and the world on their daily experiences. One of the most important experiences adults can provide for children is to talk and listen to them. Through these daily interactions, children and adults can develop relationships that help children learn about themselves and the world. Adults who care for children have a responsibility to create and maintain positive and healthy relationships with them. One of the most practical and mutually rewarding ways to achieve this goal is through positive communication.

Research suggests that the best parent-child relationships are characterized by positive communication and interaction. Parents and children with a healthy relationship communicate on a regular basis about many different things, not just when there is a conflict. Researchers believe that when adults stay in touch with children through attention and conversation, children might be less likely to act out or behave in ways that create conflict or require discipline.

Communicating with children of different ages

Effective communication with children requires styles and behavior appropriate to the child's age. Rewarding interactions with children require an understanding of how children of different ages communicate and what they like to talk about. Adults must communicate in a way that relates to the age and interests of the child.

Infants: birth to 12 months

Infants communicate with coos, gurgles and grunts, facial expressions, cries, body movements like cuddling or back arching, eye movements, and arm and leg movements. Recognize these signs and encourage the infant's efforts at communication:

- Quickly respond to infant communication (e.g., comfort a crying baby, smile at a smiling infant, relax if a baby turns her head to the side).
- Provide meaning for infants' communicative efforts (e.g., "You are crying, so I know it is time for your bottle." "You are smiling; you like it when I tickle your feet!").

- Use a sing-song, high-pitched tone of voice, exaggerated facial expressions and wide-open eyes when interacting with young infants. These types of behavior capture infants' attention and help them to keep focused on interacting.
- Make the most of the times when you and an infant are facing each other (e.g., during diaper changes, feedings, mealtimes) and talk, sing or gently tickle the infant. Infants are fascinated by adult faces and love to look at them when they are close.
- Pay attention to an infant's style of expressing emotions, preferred level of activity and tendency to be social. Some infants are quiet, observant and prefer infrequent adult interaction. Other infants are emotional, active and seek continuous adult attention and interaction. Recognizing each infant's unique personality will make effective communication easier.

Toddlers: 12 to 36 months

Toddlers communicate with a combination of gestures and grunts, one- and two-word sentences, positive and negative emotional expressions, and body movements. Recognize these signs and encourage the toddler's efforts at communication:

- Respond quickly and predictably to toddlers' communicative efforts (e.g., "You are pointing at the fridge; is it time for some juice?" "Bah-bah, that means you want your blanket, doesn't it?").
- Expand on toddlers' one- and two-word communications, and build sentences around their words (e.g., "Hot, that's right, the pizza is hot." "Blue, your pants are blue with white stripes, aren't they?" "Do again? Okay, I'll push you some more on the swing.").
- Keep a word diary in which you record toddlers' new words. Share the diary with other adults so they will use the words in conversations with the toddler.
- Give toddlers one direction at a time, and provide warnings before transitions (e.g., "We're going to leave for grandma's house in five minutes." Five minutes pass. "Okay, time to get ready, go get your coat from the bedroom.").
- Label toddlers' emotions (e.g., "When you fall and get hurt, you feel sad." "Playing with your cousin Mary makes you happy!").
- Make the most of daily routines and talk toddlers through the sequence in which they happen (e.g.,

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“First we put warm water in the bathtub. Then you take off your clothes and get in!”).

- During play with toddlers, follow their lead and let them create the play. Describe for toddlers what they are doing during play and let them have control (e.g., “Oh, you are driving the car up the sofa, now it is falling to the floor! Here comes the truck to take the car to the garage.”).
- When telling older toddlers what you want, explain to the toddler why you want something to happen (e.g., “Janey, I told you to please pick up your blocks and put them away. I don’t want anyone tripping and falling over them.”).

Preschoolers: 3 to 6 years

Preschoolers begin to talk in full sentences that are grammatically correct. Young preschoolers might struggle with telling stories in the correct order, but sequencing the events of a story comes much more easily by age 6.

Preschoolers like to talk about their past experiences. They experiment with pretend and fantasy play, and they sometimes talk about imaginary experiences.

At this age, children begin to recognize the connection between the spoken and written word. They often recognize traffic signs and restaurant signs without being told what they literally say.

Preschoolers often talk to themselves when playing and working on tasks such as puzzles or art activities. Recognize these signs and encourage the child’s efforts at communication:

- Ask preschoolers questions about past events; probe for details and provide new words to enhance description of experiences. (e.g., “Who did you play with today? What did you do together?”)
- Encourage preschoolers to talk about their feelings — both positive and negative — and discuss the possible causes for those emotions.
- Create opportunities for preschoolers to engage in fantasy and pretend play, either alone or with friends. (e.g., pretend baby bathing, housekeeping or astronaut play)
- Provide opportunities for preschoolers to experience the connection between the spoken word and the written word. (e.g., label familiar parts of the physical environment, have children tell you stories and write them down, allow children to write their own stories or thank you notes, have children collect items from

the environment which include words that they can read)

- When preschoolers are talking to themselves, let them be. Self-talk helps preschoolers focus on what they are doing.

School-age: 6 to 12 years

School-age children talk in full sentences. Much like adults, they ask more questions, relate past experiences in vivid detail and seek more information and justification for the way things are.

They can understand and talk about another person’s perspective and are beginning to recognize the influence their behavior can have on others. School-age children can handle more pieces of information at once and can effectively engage in goal setting and problem-solving with assistance from adults.

At this age, children spend more time talking and playing with peers and friends. Recognize these signs and encourage the child’s efforts at communication:

- Keep up with school-age children’s activities, likes, dislikes and peer relationships by talking to them. Peers are important at this stage, and adults can keep informed about their children’s relationships by talking regularly with children.
- Help school-age children set goals and solve problems (“If you have to go to Girl Scouts this afternoon, let’s talk about when you can do your homework.”). Take time to discuss strategies and solutions, and have the child talk about possible outcomes.
- When correcting behavior, provide a calm explanation for your preferences. Giving a reason helps children understand the implications of their behavior for others (e.g., if your child teases another child because they wear glasses, explain that wearing glasses helps the child to see better and remind them that teasing can hurt another’s feelings).
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings and the possible reasons for their emotions.
- Help children learn conflict management skills. Peer relationships are becoming more important at this age, so conflicts between children will likely arise. Help children learn how to manage conflicts effectively while preserving the peer relationship. Act out pretend peer interactions with children to show how conflicts can be resolved, depending on how children handle the situation.

Encourage family stories

Children love to hear and to tell stories. Adults can encourage children and parents to share their family stories. Storytelling is a universal way for families to pass down important history from generation to generation. From hearing family stories, children learn about their family identity as well as the beliefs and expectations that make their family unique. These experiences encourage children to use their imagination to create visual images of relatives from long ago and far away. Storytelling also brings adults and children closer together and creates a wonderful opportunity for intimacy and relationship building. Ask the children and families you care about to share some of their stories.

(Taken from: Stone, E. 1988. *Black sheep and kissing cousins: How our family stories shape us*. New York: Penguin Books)

Adolescents: 12 to 18 years

Adolescents are interested in talking in-depth about themselves and about their relationships with others. They want to understand who they are becoming and what others think and feel about them. Children at this age want to talk about how they are different from their parents, and they are beginning to recognize that their parents are imperfect people.

Adolescence is a time when children typically act more negative and have more conflicts with their parents, and they spend more time alone and with their friends and less time with their families. Recognize these signs and encourage adolescents' efforts at communication:

- Be sensitive and responsive to the adolescent experience. Each adolescent is going through major

social and physical changes; practice putting yourself in their place when you find yourself disagreeing or growing impatient.

- Use conversation as an opportunity to keep up with adolescent activities and relationships. Stay interested, and gently ask questions and seek explanations for their behavior.
- Although adolescents strive for independence and separation from the family, you can best maintain the relationship by providing a balance between expecting personal responsibility from them and offering consistent support.
- Be flexible. Seek to understand the adolescent perspective first before trying to be understood yourself. Maintaining the adult-child relationship is

Be an emotion coach

Parents should help children understand their feelings. In doing so, adults can develop an emotional bond important for establishing and maintaining mutual respect. Effective emotion coaching helps children understand the emotional ups and downs of life. Research finds that children who grow up in families that spend time talking about emotions are more academically successful, have better friendships, fewer infectious diseases and can handle difficult social situations more effectively than children whose families do not talk about feelings. Here are some ideas for how adults can help children better understand their emotions:

- Observe and take note of children's emotions.
- Recognize that children's emotional expressions provide an opportunity for bonding. Make the most of these teachable moments.
- Listen and respond to children's emotions with empathy; tell them that you understand their feelings.
- Help children label their different emotions.
- Set limits while helping children problem-solve the emotional experience.

Example

When you pick up your 8-year-old daughter from after-school care, she has a bright smile on her face. What can you say and do?

Parent: Honey, you have a huge smile on your face! Tell me why.

Child: Today when we were jumping rope, I did the whole thing without messing up!

Parent: You must feel so happy and proud of yourself! I know how much you like to jump rope and how hard you work at it.

Child: Yeah, and today I tried extra hard to do it without messing up and it worked!

Parent: That's great, sweetheart.

Example

Your 7-year-old son comes home from playing next door and looks sullen and glum. In fact, when he gets in the door, he throws his coat on the floor without hanging it up. What can you say and do?

Parent: Nate, what's going on? You always remember to hang up your coat. Did something happen at Stuart's?

Child: I hate him! I'm not playing over there anymore.

Parent: You sound really angry. What happened?

Child: Stuart never lets me play with his new train.

Parent: Why do you think that is?

Child: I don't know. He says I'll break it.

Parent: Well, I can understand why you are mad, but you know Stuart just got the train for his birthday last month. He's probably scared to let anybody else use it. What do you think you can do to let him know you'll be careful with it?

Child: I don't know.

Parent: Well, instead of getting angry, maybe you could tell him that you understand why he is being careful and ask him to show you exactly what he wants you to do. Let him know that you'll be careful. If he says no, you might just have to wait longer, but at least you tried.

Child: Yeah, I know.

perhaps the most helpful thing you can do to support the adolescent through these years.

- Recognize that they are developing ideas that might differ from your own. Unless these ideas place the adolescent in danger of harm to self or others, accept their beliefs as an example of their developing individuality.

The power of the written word

Sometimes we get so busy with everyday life that we forget the simpler ways to communicate. In *Put Your Heart on Paper*, Henriette Klauser encourages use of the written word as a way of staying in touch. She says that writing can start communications that might be too difficult for the spoken word and can heal conflicts between adults and children. Most important is that these writings become part of the relationship's history. Here are some ideas for how to use the written word in your relationships:

- On a small piece of paper, state a simple request such as "I'd like to take a walk with you," and leave the note in a visible place.
- If you are having trouble understanding a child or making yourself understood, use writing as an opportunity for explanations.
- Use a journal to document a relationship's history and record special events and time spent together.
- Leave small greetings for each other in unlikely places such as on the bathroom mirror or in a backpack.
- Share a journal with someone. Keep the journal in a place where each person can easily get to it and record feelings and experiences.

Make the most of communication

Few activities in life come with so great a reward as communicating effectively with one another. The ideas in this guide can help you develop healthy and mutually rewarding adult-child relationships. The world can be overwhelming for children. By paying attention to and communicating regularly with children, you can help them create a positive and healthy view of themselves and the world.

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