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## EFFECTIVE USE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Parents want and need to reach their child, but this is sometimes really difficult to do. Effective communication is really, really elusive at times between parent and child. Misunderstandings between parent and child happen often. Hurt feelings between parent and child happen often. Angry feelings between parent and child happen often. But most of the parents I have worked with over the years want badly, even desperately, to communicate well with their children to help their child feel understood and accepted, rather than criticized and judged.

**But a parent cannot communicate acceptance to their child if a parent is a poor communicator.** There are many ways to be a poor communicator.

Therefore, parents need positive models showing them what effective communication looks like. Those models can be found in one's parents or one's spouse. But if the patterns you were exposed to as a child growing up in your family were off base, or if the ways your spouse communicates with your children are lacking in any way, the ideas which I will explore next might prove to be helpful.

First, understand that **one of the best moments to communicate acceptance to a child, to really help them feel accepted, is when they are experiencing strong feelings.** At those moments, they are raw and vulnerable. Your attitudes about them, your actions towards them and your words directed at them become amplified and are more important than ever.

At these times I recommend you use "**Active Listening**" as your first means of communicating well. Active Listening involves **listening carefully** to what your children say, the intensity with which they say it, and the body language they

manifest when they are speaking. When using Active Listening, **paraphrase what they say**, acknowledging the intensity with which they say it. Use their body language, including posture, tone of voice, and expressions on their face to help you discern what they are feeling, including the intensity of that feeling. Then paraphrase what you hear and see: *“It seems like you are really, really angry at your friend because he said some hurtful things to you earlier today.”*

If you are wrong, ask a few questions to help you get in the correct emotional ballpark and then add: *“I think I get it now. You’re explaining that you are more hurt than angry. And not just a little hurt. You feel really, really hurt.”*

Once you are in your child’s emotional ballpark, **ask some clarifying questions to help you understand what led to these feelings**. I ask parents to pretend they are filming a movie and need to see and hear exactly what their child experienced. Who said what and who did what. I encourage parents to get a description in sequence, so they would be able to portray in a movie how their child came to feel both their feelings and the intensity of those feelings.

However, with those children who go silent or bristle at being asked a question, I encourage parents to simply state what they see and hear and pause long enough to let the child respond if they wish to do so. If the child does not respond verbally, use their body language to sense if you are on the right track in your paraphrases. In short, always listen, reflect back and paraphrase. Then use clarifying questions if you have a child who is open to allowing you to pose questions of them. Make sure you only ask questions in the service of your sincere effort to understand them better. Never use questions to interrogate or to make the child see **your** point of view.

As new details emerge during your child’s description of events, feelings and thoughts, ask them how each emerging detail or behavior changed or shaped their feelings. Be sure to also **ask them about what they were thinking at each moment as our feelings are very frequently shaped by what we think and**

**what we tell ourselves about the events.** You may feel your child is misinterpreting the events. If you do, wait. First make sure your child feels understood. A bit later you can ask them to consider your interpretation of events. *“I’m not sure your friend intended to be hurtful and mean. I think he may have been upset when his mother yelled at him and may have snapped at you instead of her.”*

How does a parent get started with Active Listening?

First note that your child appears to have strong feelings. Then determine if he wants to talk about them. Simply state what you notice and then wait. *“I notice you seem upset.”* If the child declines to respond to your paraphrase, put that into words. *“I notice you are reluctant to talk right now.”* If your child continues to demur, drop it. **Active Listening is an invitation, not a command or demand.** You will have to regulate your own anxiety and control your eagerness to learn more about what’s bothering your child. However, I would end with a loving, open-ended invitation. *“If you change your mind and want to share, I am always available to listen. I am here to help you.”* If your child seems interested in being listened to or being helped, but is still somewhat reluctant to say more, as many children are, add *“If you feel like giving me a few more details, I probably would be much better able to help you.”*

What do you do if YOU are the one with the feelings and you want your child to listen to you?

**Your way of speaking to your child is also an important part of good communication.** Please remember that asking your child to listen to you is quite different than asking your child to agree with you or to obey you. It means you want your child to know something about what you are feeling, often about a situation stimulated by their actions. But this feedback should not carry a demand that the child immediately apologize to you or reform themselves. It is part of a

sharing intimacy you want to establish with your child. This sharing is also part of your responsibility to help your child understand his impact on you and others. You share in such a way that the child, over time, can come to understand how you feel and what his impact on you is. You accept your child. You do not reject your child. But you give the child a chance to be a better, more humanly developed version of himself. *“I know my question irritated you and I wouldn’t mind if you had said that to me. But when you just rolled your eyes and cursed under your breath, I felt really hurt and disrespected. I really don’t want to feel that way with you.”*

This form of sharing is called **“Sending a Feeling Message.”** Along with **“Active Listening,”** it goes a long way towards helping a parent have a robust, effective communication pattern with his or her children. In this kind of communication, both parties can slowly learn to be self-revealing, but in a kind and accepting way, rather than in a criticizing and hurtful way.

## Clarifying Questions

There is one more skill I encourage parents to use when they want to become more effective and more accepting communicators. I encourage the frequent use of **“Clarifying Questions.”** Many parents come to me and complain that their children become defensive when the parent asks questions. Since I try to practice what I preach, I engage in Active Listening with these unhappy parents. *“You feel hurt, ignored and angry when you ask your child a question and they brush you off or prematurely and angrily end the conversation. Have I understood you correctly?”* Once that is established, I try to create in my mind a videotape of exactly how it happens that this parent repeatedly gets shut down by their child. I ask lots of clarifying questions. *“How often does this happen?” “Does your child do this with his father and sister also?” “Can you describe how you begin the conversation?” “What words exactly do you use?” “What does he say in response to that?”* And the conversation between the parent and me progresses. And here

is what I often find: the **parent is using pseudo questions rather than clarifying questions.**

Pseudo-questions are questions the parent asks when the parent already knows the answer. Pseudo-questions are questions parents use when they want the child to admit or realize something. Pseudo-questions contain the parent's agenda. Pseudo questions have question marks at the end of the sentence, but the question marks are upside-down fish hooks, intended to catch the child, forcing them to admit the parent's point of view is the correct one. *"Don't you think you should start your homework now instead of after dinner?" "Do you really think you should talk that way to your friend?" "Aren't you tired of acting that way towards me?"*

Clarifying questions, on the other hand, come from a place of real curiosity, real willingness to get the facts, feelings and perspectives from the child's point of view. Parents who wish to understand their children better must demonstrate a curiosity about their child's inner workings and a real willingness to let the child decide how to think about their world. *"What considerations lead you to decide when to start your homework?" "What were you feeling when you told your friend he was out of line?" "What is it I say or do that leads you to respond so angrily when we try to discuss personal stuff?"* You may feel safer using pseudo-questions. You may feel less comfortable "allowing" your child to have opinions and judgments which you disagree with or disapprove of. But **pseudo-questions almost always lead a child to shut down more and more, whereas an authentic series of clarifying questions can help a child bond with you in mutual exploration of the way they think and feel.** Clarifying questions are surely the better way to go. The choice is yours.

Please understand that some children will not respond positively even to sincere and authentic clarifying questions. I have become convinced, after years of working with parents and children, that if a parent uses active listening and asks

clarifying rather than pseudo-questions, children “know” their parent is being sincere and is “on their side.” **They may not be ready to talk in greater depth, but they will know you are there for them. When they are ready, they will turn to you.**

Please, please do not underestimate the value and importance of communicating effectively with your child.

My own clinical practice and the available research both indicate that children who are allowed to share their feelings and their experience become less rigidly “buttoned up,” and far more resilient when faced with life’s challenges.

Additionally, life seems to throw everyone, even children, lots of curveballs and microtraumas. It may be getting teased, not being invited to the party, getting yelled at by the coach or your co-parent. It may be failure on a test or failure to make the team. But adversity, disappointment and micro-trauma come our children’s way no matter how much you wish to protect them. My clinical practice and research show that helping children to communicate with you in a safe environment, helping them process their emotions, reflecting back their emotions and your understanding, and helping them create a coherent narrative of their experiences safeguards them enormously. This emotional process helps them avoid being traumatized, even if they are hurt.

Hopefully you are feeling more and more confident about where to start in developing your communication skills with your children. Now, let’s turn to thinking together about how to create and enforce standards, rules and limits.

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