

Healthy Communication With Your Child



Healthy communication with your child is one of the most important and rewarding skills that you can develop as a parent. It also makes the tough parts of parenting (such as disciplining your child) much easier and more effective. Good communication is a two-way street, meaning that listening to your child is just as important as talking to him.

When you talk in a calm and caring manner, you let your child know what you expect of him and give him information that he needs. You also show him that when you ask him to calm down and control his temper, you are practicing what you preach.

Listening to your child helps you learn more about what is going on with your child. You can learn his thoughts about a subject, how he is getting along socially, what problems he may be having, and whether your child is getting the message that you are trying to communicate.

Good communication is needed so that you can be a good teacher for your child and know what is happening in your child's life.

Why is healthy communication important?

Healthy communication is important because it helps your child

- Feel cared for and loved
- Feel safe and not all alone with her worries
- Learn to tell you what she feels and needs directly in words
- Learn how to manage her feelings safely so that she does not act on feelings without thinking
- Talk to you openly
- Learn to listen to you

Healthy communication also helps *you*

- Feel close to your child
- Know your child's needs
- Know you have powerful tools to help your child develop and grow
- Manage your own stress and frustrations with your child

What are the building blocks of healthy communication?

Here are a few important ways to build healthy communication

- **Be available.** Make time in everyone's busy schedule to stop and talk about things. Even 10 minutes a day without distractions for you and your child to talk can make a big difference in forming good communication habits. Turn off the television or radio. Give your undivided attention to your child. Sit down and look at your child while you talk. Those few minutes a day can be of great value.
- **Be a good listener.** When you listen to your child, you help your child feel loved and valued. Ask your child about his feelings on a subject. If you are not clear about what your child is saying, repeat what you are hearing to be sure that you understand what your child is trying to say. You do not

have to agree with what your child is saying to be a good listener. Sharing his thoughts with you helps your child calm down, so later he can listen to you.

- **Show empathy.** This means tuning in to your child's feelings and letting him know you understand. If your child is sad or upset, a gentle touch or hug may let him know that you understand those sad or bad feelings. Do not tell your child what he thinks or feels. Let him express those feelings. And be sure not to minimize these feelings by saying things like, "It's silly to feel that way," or "You'll understand when you get older." His feelings are real to him and should be respected.
- **Be a good role model.** Remember, children learn by example. Use words and tones in your voice that you want your child to use. Make sure that your tone of voice and what you do send the same message. For example, if you laugh when you say, "No, don't do that," the message will be confusing. Be clear in your directions. Once you get the message across, do not wear out your point. If you use words to describe your feelings, it will help your child to learn to do the same. When parents use feeling words, such as, "It makes me feel sad when you won't do what I ask you to do," instead of screaming or name calling, children learn to do the same.

Keys to healthy communication

Do

- Give clear, age-appropriate directions such as, "When we go to the store I expect you to be polite and stay with me." Make sure your child understands what you have said. Sometimes children do not fully understand the meanings of words they hear and use.
- Praise your child whenever you can.
- Calmly communicate your feelings.
- Be truthful.
- Listen carefully to what your child says.
- Use your talking times as teachable moments – do not miss opportunities to show your child healthy communication.
- Model what you want your child to do – practice what you preach.
- Make sure that when you are upset with your child, she knows that it is her behavior that is the problem, not the child herself.

Don't

- Give broad, general instructions such as, "You'd better be good!"
- Name call or blame. "You are bad" should be replaced with "I don't like the way you are acting."
- Yell or threaten.
- Lie or tell your child half-truths.
- Use silence to express strong feelings. Long silences frighten and confuse children.

Discipline is not punishment

Part of a parent's job is to discipline a child. Discipline is not punishment. Discipline is actually a form of communication. It means teaching children appropriate behavior and correcting inappropriate behavior.

How do you change a child's behavior? The most effective way is through healthy communication. Make sure to teach your child what positive behavior is and praise him when he behaves the way you want him to. Focus on the things he does right and he will be less likely to do things you do not want him to do.

No matter how old your child is, he needs you to calmly and clearly explain (in language that he can fully understand) what you expect from him and what the consequences will be (for example, taking away a privilege) if he acts inappropriately. Then, if the child does misbehave, follow through on the consequences you and he have already discussed. This way, you are not reacting purely out of anger or frustration.

Keeping your cool

There are times when all parents feel that they are out of patience. However, it is always important to find ways to help your child to behave without hurting her feelings. Here are a few ways to calm yourself when you feel stressed, before you try to talk with your child.

- Take a few deep breaths very slowly.
- Wait 5 minutes before starting to talk to your child.
- Try to find a word to label what you are feeling (such as "disappointment"). Say it to yourself and be sure that it is appropriate for you child.
- Share your feelings of frustration with your spouse or a friend.
- Do not hold grudges. Deal only with the present.
- Seek professional help if you feel that you have lost control.

Quick ways to offer praise

A smile and a short phrase can communicate valuable information. Here are just a few phrases that will go a long way.

- Outstanding!
- Nice work!
- Terrific!
- You made my day!
- You are so responsible.
- Good for you.
- You are really growing up!
- I like the way you share.
- Awesome!
- You figured it out on your own.
- I like the way you took care of that.
- What a good listener you are!
- You are so important to me.
- I love you so much!
- Bravo!

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From your doctor

American Academy
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