

Family Talk

Busy families talk with each other in a variety of ways: by phone or answering machine, written messages at work, notes left on the refrigerator or mirror, greeting cards and sometimes even by computer. Finding time for face-to-face conversation may require extra effort and planning. Without this important time, however, family members can forget how to relate to one another. Good communication skills are strengthened with patience, practice, and a positive attitude.

Communicating in Times of Stress

Families as well as individuals experience stress. While a certain level of stress keeps us alert and motivated, too much stress may cause DISTRESS. Managing the pressures and tensions that act destructively is a key to harmonious family life. How well does your family cope with stress? Check all that apply: When there is a problem in our family, we...

- ▶ Support one another
- ▶ Let one person make the decision
- ▶ Take sides
- ▶ Talk about it
- ▶ Ignore it until it goes away
- ▶ Hold grudges
- ▶ Consider everyone's viewpoint
- ▶ Get uptight and yell
- ▶ Stop talking and withdraw
- ▶ Formulate a plan and act on it

Which of these behaviors are positive? Which ones should be replaced by more constructive communication methods? Talking out concerns or problems may be the first step to resolving a conflict.

Positive Conflict Resolution

- ▶ Treat the other person with respect. Avoid sarcasm or condescending tones.
- ▶ Empathize! The goal of listening is to understand the content of another person's ideas, the meaning it has for him/her, and the feelings behind the thoughts.
- ▶ State your views objectively.
- ▶ Ask questions to clarify the issue and provide feedback to the speaker.
- ▶ Search for a point of agreement, a comfort zone, which will lead to compromise and resolution.

Talking Without Words

Sometimes we overlook the subtle power of nonverbal communication. Even in normal conversation it's been estimated that only one-third of the message is communicated verbally, the rest is conveyed on a nonverbal level. Consider the teen who comes in late from a date...his parent's facial expression will probably prepare him/her for the unpleasant reception that follows, before the first word is ever spoken!

Nonverbal messages communicate attitudes, values, and emotions. Compare the following body cues which signal affection or hostility:

Hostility/Indifference

Glancing at the person
Shrugging off attempted hug
Clenching fist
Interrupting repeatedly
Yawning
Looking away while listening

VS.

Affection/Caring

Looking directly at the person
Giving a pat on the back
Squeezing hand
Encouraging the other person to talk
Smiling
Open facial expression

Wouldn't it be easy to misunderstand or misinterpret a communication based strictly on body language? The end result may be confusion, personal offense, or suspicion. Observe how others respond to your nonverbal cues to determine their impact on your spoken message.

Silence: The Quiet Encouragement

The effective use of silence can be one of the most powerful tools to convey acceptance and encouragement. Successfully moving beyond a fear of silence in interpersonal relationships can be instrumental in breaking down traditional communication barriers. It can give family members time to gather their thoughts and the courage to say what they want to say.

We use words when our family needs to know we hear them and understand. We use silence when no words can express our interest and love. The balance between these two responses can only be learned through practice. Feelings and emotions are dominant forces in our lives. Their intensity and expression give dimension to our words and actions. Think about how differently we think and speak when we feel angry and unsupported, and when we feel calm and in control.