

HOW TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILDREN

Learning to listen is essential.

by Dr. Kenneth A. Erickson

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My parents furnish every material thing I need—plenty of food, good clothes and a nice place to live. Everything but the time I want with them. They're always busy when I need to talk. When trying to discuss something with them, I always get the same response, "Not now!" As a result, I'm convinced I'm unloved by my own parents.

—A high school senior

Family therapists, whom American adults pay more than \$1 billion a year to listen to them, report that listening to others is the number one deficit in homes today. In fact, the chief reason given by youngsters for running away from home is the lack of family communication.

A survey of 3,000 high-school students supports this conclusion. The major message most youth have for mothers and dads is, "Communicate with us more."

Adults who neglect their children's need for regular, loving communication can seem like impersonal robots who furnish only food, clothing and shelter.

Deprived of family companionship, youth soon become convinced they're unloved.

There will always be times when, as parents, we should voice our convictions. More often, however, we should shut our mouths, listen, and try to understand what our children are saying. We can offer no more important gift to youth than our undivided attention to what they wish to share with us.

So, assuming we're convinced of the need to listen, what skills can we use to make this possible?

Listening habits

Sincere listening is essential for two-way communication. A friend admitted he normally browsed through the newspaper while "listening" to his son. Lacking eye contact soon convinced Bryan he had nothing of value or interest his dad wanted to hear. But once the father realized what his actions were telling his son, he changed his behavior. Now when Bryan talks, his dad lays aside the paper and makes eye contact with him.

"I've quit faking attention," says Bryan's dad. "Now my attitude communicates, 'Tell me more. I care about you and want to understand what it's like to be in your shoes.'"

Sarcastic replies can actually be devastating to children. When working as a high-school principal, I met some parents who not only were indifferent listeners but also verbally abusive. Psychologists confirm the fact that youth can become desperate enough to consider suicide when experiencing humiliation from angry parents who refuse to listen or talk with them.

Use “I” messages, not “You” messages

Our communication with children is less effective when we use “you” instead of “I” statements. A “you” message sounds instantly judgmental and places blame on the child: “You made me drop the salad bowl!” Or, “Your talking made me get this traffic ticket!”

By comparison, “I” messages normally foster more positive attitudes. Notice in these comments how the focus is shifted from assigning blame to correcting the problem or behavior.

“I get nervous and jumpy whenever someone sneaks up behind me and yells.”

“While driving in traffic, I get very distracted when there’s so much commotion in the back seat. Now we’ll have to figure out where the money for my traffic ticket will come from.”

Pointing out the results of a child’s behavior is more helpful in the long run. When we habitually use “you” messages, we create an adversarial situation rather than a cooperative one. And, of course, whenever we pin blame on someone, he naturally will attempt to shift it elsewhere. That’s when the battle begins.

“I” messages encourage more open and honest responses. They also help children understand a parent’s feelings and needs.

More communication helps

As parents, we can improve our home relationships if we’ll adopt some of these additional skills for good communication:

- When listening to a youngster, periodically feed back what you hear as your child’s main message. You might preface your comments with, “I want to understand what you’re saying. Is this what you mean?” While such clarification requires that you say very little, your questions will guarantee more accurate communication.
- Use some brief, noncommittal remarks that encourage a child to say more. Examples include “I see.” “I’d like to hear more about it.” “That’s interesting.” Or, “That’s really important to you, isn’t it?”
- Be alert for what your child is saying nonverbally. Watch for physical hints of feelings—“body language”—that often is more meaningful than the spoken words.

- Compliment a youth for every evidence of good thinking. Add how much you appreciate these opportunities when the two of you can share your thoughts together.
- Always take time to talk with a child who comes with a question. He will never be more ready to listen.
- If your youngster is small, get down on the same level for one-on-one exchanges. Imagine how you might feel trying to communicate with someone 10 feet tall. Sit on the floor or in similar-sized chairs.
- Seek regular opportunities to listen to each of your children. Consider scheduling weekly “talk-times” on the family calendar so your kids can look forward to a special time with you.
- Use “prompters” to encourage a child to start a conversation or to talk about his or her thoughts and feelings with you:
 - “How did things go for you today?”
 - “Would you like to talk about it?”
 - “How do you feel about what happened?”
- On a birthday or other special day, give a coupon good for a gift of time together, such as some special outing or adventure. Make it a memorable experience shared by just the two of you.
- Realize what a poor substitute the TV set is for a parent. While a TV talks, it never listens to your child. Neither can it hold your child’s hand, give a hug or say, “I love you.”

Theologian Paul Tillich says the first duty of love is to listen. When we really listen to a child, our compassion helps us sense the youngster’s needs, anxieties, joys and sorrows as if they were our own.

There always will be times when parents need to speak up. More often, however, we need to listen. It is just as we find in James 1:19: “Don’t ever forget that it is best to listen much, speak little, and not become angry.”

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