

How to Effectively **COMMUNICATE** *With Your Child*

Talk between parents and children is very important, if for no other reason than it is relatively rare when compared to the other activities that today's busy families are engaged in. For example, American children spend an average of 4 hours each day in front of the television--that's 28 hours per week. At this rate, they will have watched 22,000 hours of TV by age 18--more time than they will spend in the classroom. And this does not include time spent in front of video games and computers. With an increase in the number of parents working outside the home, children are spending more time under the care of a non-parent. These and other factors in our culture make parent-child talk a special event.

Parent-child talk is also important because of its power. Talking is one of the most effective ways you can share information with your children, strengthen your relationship with them, help them understand and deal with their emotions, and pass on to them values, beliefs, and hopes. Basically, talking is one of the main tools that you use to further the intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth of your children. However, if not used carefully, talking can have a negative effect. It can be used to communicate misinformation, discount or deny feelings, disrupt mood and emotions, and instill fear, doubt, confusion, and hopelessness. As a parent, your goal is to keep your children talking to you. The ideas described below are designed to help you achieve this goal by communicating more effectively with your children.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN

One of the most common reasons for miscommunication between parents and children is that parents often talk to their children as if they were little adults. Parents do this because thinking and talking as an adult comes naturally to them. However, there are some important differences between how adults and children think and talk that are important to keep in mind if you want to effectively communicate with your child.

Thinking Skills

Adults tend to think about things in a very logical and rational way. They are most comfortable when things are talked about in ways that fit together and make sense. They can use and understand abstract ideas in their talk. However, young children (from 2 to about 7 years) have very basic thinking skills that are best described as pre-logical or magical. Their minds do not have the need to make logical sense of things the same way the adult mind does.

	Adults	Young Children
Thinking	Logical Rational Abstract	Pre-logical Irrational Concrete
Language	Advanced Indirect Implicit	Simple Direct Explicit
Sense of Time	Long-term	Short-term

The ability to reason and think logically develops over time. The minds of school-age children (between about 8 and 12 years) require that things they can see, feel, and relate to in their everyday life make some sense. While they are logical as it relates to these concrete things, they are not yet fully capable of reasoning about abstract ideas. This ability does not fully develop until the adolescent years.

Language Skills

Adults use language in a very advanced way. The meaning of words is often understood within the context of the conversation and the situation. As a result, adults often use language in an indirect or roundabout way. They do this because it gets the point across without being too confrontational. When adults talk to each other they have the skills to follow the reasoning of the conversation and to interpret the meaning of indirect language.

Most children begin using language around age two. During their early years (from 2 to about 7 years), they interpret language very literally. That is, they understand the words they hear in their literal meaning, not what was implied or meant. They have a hard time understanding the “hidden” meaning of indirect language or understanding the meaning of abstract words. They have an easier time understanding words that relate to things they can see, hear, feel, taste, or smell. This kind of language is called “concrete.” Children between the ages of 8 and 12 are not as literal in their understanding and use of language; however, they will have a harder time talking about and understanding abstract ideas. The ability to understand abstract language begins about 12 years of age.

Sense of Time

Adults think about time differently than young children. Most adults think about how their current behavior will affect future behavior. That is, they think about things with their long-term goals in mind. However, young children are immediate oriented. They are concerned mostly about what is happening right now. They have not yet developed delayed gratification, which is the ability to put off an immediate desire for something more desirable later. As a result, they are more concerned about immediate, short-term goals than long-term goals. The ability to think about the future and delay gratification develops during the later elementary school years.

Imbalance of Power

Children are at a big disadvantage when talking with parents because parents are more powerful than they are in three areas. The most obvious is physically; you are bigger than your child is, and she is physically dependent on you for most things. Second, as discussed above, your thinking and talking skills are fully developed, while your child’s are not. Third, you have much more life experience to draw from than your child. This gives you more wisdom when thinking and talking.

Being aware of the characteristics of children can help you better understand their behavior and how to best relate to them. Next, let’s look at some general guidelines that will help you effectively communicate with your child.

GENERAL RULES WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN

As a parent, your goal in talking with your child is to further her intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual growth. In order to do this most effectively, you need to create an environment where your child is not afraid to talk with you and when she does, she will not feel that she will be punished for what she says or does not say. Below are some “general rules” to keep in mind when talking with children that will help create such an environment. As with most rules, they do not apply to all situations, but can be used as general guidelines.

1. Show interest.

Talking with someone can be very rewarding when the other person shows an interest in what you are talking about. Interest is communicated by listening, paying attention, and contributing to the conversation.

- *Physically get down to their level*
- *Make eye contact*
- *Repeat back what you heard the child say to you*

If you want your child to continue to talk with you, you need to take the time to show interest when he does.

2. Use simple language.

When talking with your child, use language that she will understand. Don't assume she will follow your reasoning or understand the meaning of abstract words. The younger the child, the more brief, direct, concrete, and specific you will need to be.

3. Be gentle.

Because you are much more powerful than your child in many ways, your child is vulnerable to harm. You have the responsibility of protecting him from harm. Be respectful of your child's vulnerable position and be gentle when talking with him. Don't bully him into agreeing with you or make him feel inferior by misusing your superior skills, this will only make him afraid to talk with you in the future.

4. Let the conversation go where it will.

Because young children do not have fully developed thinking and talking skills, do not expect everything that they say to fit together nicely. Conversations with children often wind around in different directions, going from topic to topic with no clear logical connection. While clear communication is something you want them to develop over time, remember that their logical skills are still developing and that the fact that they are talking to you is important. Go with it!

5. Don't feel you always need to “fix” the problem.

When talking with your child, what should you do when you feel you know the right answer, know how to solve a problem, or know the “right” thing to do in a particular situation? While sometimes it is appropriate to pass on your knowledge directly, at

other times it may be most helpful for you to help your child develop her own talking and thinking skills.

- Sometimes your child will talk to you about something that is on her mind as a way of trying to make sense of it. The best response in this situation may be to just listen.
- In other situations, rather than merely giving your child the answer or solution, you can ask a question or series of questions that will keep her talking and thinking. For example, if she tells you about a situation at school in which some kids got in trouble. You could ask her what are some things she could do to avoid trouble if she were ever in that situation.
- Sometimes your child will tell you about something that is on her mind and would prefer that you not act on the information. If your child feels that every time a problem is reported to you, you will run off and try and fix it, she may be less likely to talk with you about similar concerns in the future. If you feel there is something you can do to help, talk with her about it. Although, there are times when it may be appropriate to get involved, at other times it may be best to keep things confidential.

6. Don't be afraid to talk about important topics.

Just like adults, children have the need to talk about and can benefit from talking about important topics, such as sex, drugs, death, God, commitment, etc. You can play an important role in providing correct information and helping your child develop his own ideas and values about important topics. If you don't, he may learn about them on the playground, from TV, or from some other source that may not be helpful. Here are some points to consider.

- Be sure to use language your child will understand. Don't assume he will understand language and reasoning the same way you do.
- While sometimes your child will bring up important topics on his own, you can also plan a time to talk about an important topic, such as reading a sex education book together before bedtime or watching and discussing a video on drugs.
- It is sometimes helpful to talk about important topics with your child before he is faced with them in his own life. This can prepare him for handling situations. For example, it can be helpful to talk with him about a strategy to resist peer pressure to use drugs before he has actually faced such a situation.

7. Know when to stop.

As in all conversation, talking too long about a subject can cause people to lose interest. A young child is rarely able to talk about a particular topic for more than a few minutes. A child's ability to attend to a particular subject will increase as she gets older. What can start out as an interesting talk between you and your child can quickly turn into an

uninteresting “lecture” if it goes on too long. There may be more that you would like to say about a topic, but it may be best to wait for another time.

8. Use humor

All talk need not be serious. In fact, some of the most enjoyable conversations are those that are lighter and include some humor. Such conversations help build relationships. In addition, the ability to find humor in situations is a great coping strategy. You can help make talking with your child enjoyable and help her to develop a sense of humor by sharing with her those things you find humorous in a situation and listening to her share what she finds humorous.

COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY

Talk between parents and children can have different purposes. What makes a talk successful depends on the purpose of the talk. The purpose of some talk is to exchange information. At other times, the talkers are trying to learn something from each other. Sometimes, the purpose of talking is to share how a person feels about a situation. At still other times, the goal of talking is to get children to do a specific action. This section will discuss the characteristics of these four types of talk and things parents can do to make such talk successful.

Talking to Exchange Information

The purpose of much talk between parent and child is to exchange specific information. These kinds of conversations are typically brief, to the point, and specific information is exchanged. The following is an example of a conversation intended to exchange information.

JAMES: “Dad, what time will you be home tonight?”

DAD: “Regular time. Why?”

JAMES: “Because I have baseball practice at 5:30 and I need a ride.”

DAD: “Where is practice at?”

JAMES: “At Bishop Park.”

DAD: “Okay, I can take you. I will try and be home at 5:00. Make sure you start on any homework before practice.”

JAMES: “Okay.”

The above is an example of a successful talk for information because both James and his father got what they needed from the talk. This kind of talk is straightforward when the correct information is available and exchanged. The only real challenge with this kind of talk is when you do not know the “correct” answer. In this case, you can tell your child that you don’t know and direct him to where he can go to get the correct information. If you don’t know where to find the information, you can engage him in another kind of talk to help him find out where he needs to go to get the information.

Talking to Learn

Some of the more interesting and meaningful talks you can have with your child are the ones that go beyond the goal of information exchange toward the goal of trying to learn something from each other. This kind of talking differs from information exchange in a number of different ways. The qualities necessary for success at this kind of talk are discussed below.

- **Spend the time.** These kinds of talks take time. They are typically longer than talks that are primarily concerned with exchanging information. You should take advantage of the opportunities for this kind of talk by either taking the time when the opportunities present themselves, or arrange for such opportunities to take place.
- **Both listen and respond.** In this kind of talk, neither party should dominate the conversation. Since both are trying to learn from each other, both need to listen and respond appropriately. Since it is not essential for this kind of talk, you should not feel a need to correct every misstatement your child makes.
- **Let the talk go where it will.** During this time, you should allow the talk to wander where it will. While it may be desirable to stay on point, there should be no pressure to do so. A number of different ideas may be brought up and developed during the talk; however, it is not necessary to develop every idea.
- **Be warm and light.** One of the goals of talking for learning is to encourage more of it. You should communicate warmth during the talk, use light humor when appropriate, and not be too serious. Being critical or overbearing will destroy this kind of talk.

Talking to Share Feelings

Often times, children will talk with you to share how they feel. When this is the purpose, then your role is to help your child express her feelings and make sense of what happened to produce the feelings. One of the more common mistakes parents make during this kind of talk is to deny the child's feelings or to try and "fix" them. This is a natural response since parents do not want their child to feel bad. The following is an example of this.

JASMINE: "Mom, I hate going to Girl Scouts!"

MOM: "Oh, don't say that, your meetings are lots of fun."

JASMINE: "Nobody ever chooses me to be their partner during the games."

MOM: "Come on, the girls like you!"

In this example, the child's feelings were denied and the mother tried to talk Jasmine into feeling differently than she did. Instead, the mother could have helped her daughter understand her feelings better and put the event in some perspective.

JASMINE: "Mom, I hate going to Girl Scouts!"

MOM: "How come?"

JASMINE: "Because nobody ever chooses me to be their partner during the games."

MOM: “I am sorry you are feeling left out. Did something happen today at your meeting?”

JASMINE: “Yes, I wanted to be Ashley’s partner but she was already with Maria. I had to be Amanda’s partner and she is so annoying.”

MOM: “I see how she can be sometimes. Were you nice to her?”

JASMINE: “Yes.”

MOM: “Have you had this problem at other meetings or was this the first time?”

JASMINE: “Well, I only got to be Ashley’s partner one time this year. Usually me and Jade are partners, but she wasn’t there today.”

MOM: “I see. Sounds like things did not go the way you wanted today. I think you did the right thing by being Amanda’s partner today and being nice to her. She has a hard time making friends.”

In this example, Jasmine was able to successfully express her feelings. The mother used a series of questions and comments to help Jasmine talk more about the events and to share with her some of her thoughts about the situation.

Below are some suggestions on how to respond when your child tries to share her feelings with you.

- **Listen to your child.** When they are experiencing a negative emotion, listen to them as they express themselves. This will communicate that you care.
- **Acknowledge and label your child’s feelings.** Do not try and deny or discount their feelings (for example, “You shouldn’t be mad at that”). Instead, communicate that you understand how they feel. For example, if your child is getting frustrated with her math homework, you can listen to her express her feelings and acknowledge them; “Doing math can be really frustrating sometimes!”

Talking For Specific Action

A common type of talk that parents have with their children is talk for a specific action, such as when you direct your children to do something or tell them to stop doing something. At times, this kind of talk can lead to frustration and conflict. This kind of talk is successful when the child minds his parent with minimal disruption in the mood of both parent and child. Below are some guidelines for talking for specific action.

- **Explain, but at the right time.** Explain the reasons for your requests and rules before or after a minding situation. Engaging your child about the reasons for having to mind you in the heat of the battle will distract him from minding.
- **Choose your battles!** Use direct requests only when minding is important and you are prepared to follow-through. Parents often are not aware of how many requests they give their children. Overuse of requests can lead to confrontations and unpleasantness.

- **Use effective requests.** When minding is important, use an effective request. The five rules for effective requests are listed below.
 1. Requests should be **direct** rather than indirect. A direct request should leave no question in the child's mind that he is being told to do something, giving no illusion of choice.

Indirect request:
"Let's pick up the toys."
"How about washing your hands?"
"Will you go make your bed?"

Direct request:
"Jimmy, put your shoes in your closet, please."
 2. Requests should be **positively stated**. Positively stated requests give the child information about what "to do." Negatively worded requests only tell the child what "not to do."

Negative request:
"Stop running!"

Positive request:
"Come sit down next to me."
 3. Requests should be **specific**. Vague requests are so general and nonspecific that the child may not know exactly what to do to mind.

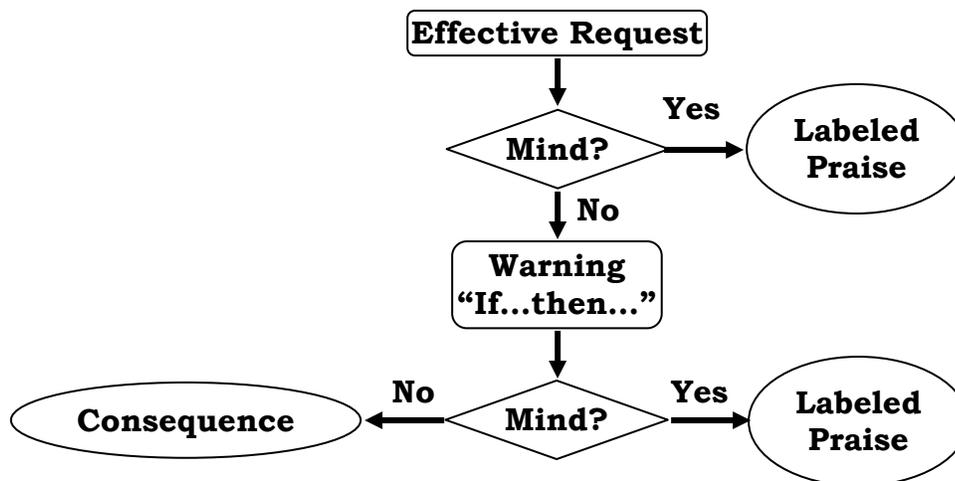
Vague requests:
"Be good."
"Be careful."
"Clean up your act!"

Specific requests:
"Move away from the door."
"Talk in a quiet voice."
 4. Give only **one request at a time**. Some children have a hard time remembering more than one thing at a time. Also avoid requests with many "hidden" requests.

Stringing requests:
"Pick up you toys, then go brush your teeth, and then go get into bed."

Hidden requests:
"Clean up your room." (This really is several requests, such as put the toys away, make your bed, put away your clothes, etc.)
 5. Requests should be **simple**. The child should be intellectually and physically capable of doing what you are requesting.
- **Follow-through!** Always follow-through after a direct request is given (see figure below).

- ⇒ If your child minds the requests, praise her. Praise is a very powerful way of rewarding good behavior. Your praise will be more powerful if you do it often, give it immediately after the behavior, use a warm tone of voice, and “label it”, or add a statement which tells what you liked about the child's behavior.
- ⇒ When your child does not mind the original request, avoid the cycle of repeating your requests without following-through. This will only lead to frustration on your part and an escalation of the child’s resistance.
- ⇒ When the child does not mind an effective request, use a warning. A warning is an if-then statement that connects the not minding behavior with a consequence. If your child does not mind the warning then follow through with the consequence.



Consistent follow-through will allow children to predict the consequences of their behavior, thereby, allowing them to exercise self-control. Children will likely need to experience this sequence several times before they learn that the consequences to their behavior will be consistent (both positive and negative).

THINGS YOU CAN DO TO TALK MORE

Given the value of parent-child talk, you should make efforts to do more of it. Below are some suggestions for encouraging more parent-child talk.

- **Take the time.** It is not always possible to plan talking time. Sometimes your child will bring up a topic at a time when you are not expecting it or are busy doing something. Take advantage of these times by stopping what you are doing and spending a few minutes to talk with him.
- **Turn off the TV.** Take advantage of the times when you and your child are together, such as meal times and car rides. During these times, turn off the TV or the radio and talk with your child.
- **Tuck them in at night.** Spend a few minutes each night tucking your child into bed. This provides a great opportunity to talk.



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- **Read a book together.** A nice way to discuss important topics is to read a book on the topic together. This can generate talk on a topic that otherwise may not come up.
- **Spend time together.** Talking takes time. The more time you spend with your child the more opportunities you will have to talk. Spend some time playing with your child each day.



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For additional resources, visit our website:

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The Center for Effective Parenting is a collaborative project of the Jones Center for Families, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences/Department of Pediatrics, and Arkansas Children's Hospital. The Center for Effective Parenting serves as the Arkansas State Parental Information & Resource Center (PIRC), which is supported by the U.S. Department of Education (Grant #84.310A)

This publication was produced and/or distributed in whole or in part with funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Parental Information and Resource Center program, under Grant # 84.310A. The content herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Education, any other agency of the U.S. government, or any other source.