

Creating a Strong Family Positive Communication: Listening and Speaking from the Heart

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This is one in a series of NebGuides by UNL Extension Family Life specialists and educators who explore the attributes and experiences of strong families.

“Allen’s been retired six months, and he’s miserable. He was used to managing several hundred people in his business, and now he sits at home and frets and grumbles all day. He says he doesn’t have any purpose in life. He drinks too much. I worry he might harm himself.”

For 45 minutes the woman discussed her husband’s distress and her own feelings of inadequacy as she struggled in vain to find ways to help him. The conversation wouldn’t have been particularly remarkable, except that she confided in someone she had just met for the first time on a brief airplane flight. After a simple “How’s life?” she responded in great detail.

Despite being total strangers, she probably was in a most difficult time in life and she found comfort confiding in another human being who expressed interest. Also, it was clear throughout the conversation that she hadn’t talked with anyone else about her husband’s situation. She carried the burden alone.

Good listeners often find themselves in conversations like this. “Bus stop intimacy” is the desperate human need to connect with others, but done with strangers who will soon be gone. Why? For a number of reasons.

Self-disclosure is a fragile art and needs constant nurturing to survive. As young children we learn quickly in the rough-and-tumble world that revealing one’s genuine feelings about life can be dangerous. There are those who are quite willing to attack you, mistaking the human need for self-expression and connection as weakness. So, we learn to hide our feelings. We become chameleons, projecting a blank and conventional image of ourselves to the world. But the loneliness and feelings of disconnection drag on us.

In a marriage we often get so caught up in survival issues — jobs, children, in-laws, broken-down cars and so forth — that time to sustain our relationship is put on the back burner. We simply don’t invest enough time in intimate communication with each other.

Also, power comes into play in many marriages. The woman on the plane seemed to approach life with her husband like an employee rather than a spouse. He was used to being the boss at work, and he brought this attitude home to his family. Rather than enjoying his time with loved ones, he simply “managed” them. She had to walk softly and waste a huge amount of emotional energy puzzling over how to approach him on countless delicate issues. She often was caught between the adult children and her husband as the children struggled to control their own lives and the husband tried to assert his authority over them.

The problem with applying a business management model in families is that few employees love their boss, and few bosses love their employees. As employees, we may respect our boss (which often simply translates to fear of the boss), but we aren’t likely to genuinely love or even like the boss. Love and friendship occur between equals. Love and friendship occur among family members when they invest time talking with each other and when they make each other feel safe and valued as they express feelings.

The two most important principles for nurturing positive communication in a family are:

“Listen with your heart and speak from the heart.”

Positive communication in families is open, honest, straight-forward and kind. Family members listen respectfully to each other. The goal as a listener is not to gather information on others so that one can pounce upon them and win an argument and assert control. The goal is to better understand how the speaker sees the world and find ways to help the individual live a more fulfilling life. All this builds a warm, emotional bond between people.

Getting families to talk:

- Begin with the end in mind. What do you want to accomplish from the discussion?
- Lay the ground rules in the family that everyone is expected to be open, honest and kind.
- Respect the feelings of each family member.

- Listen and repeat back what you heard: “I hear you saying ...”
- Brainstorm. What are all the potential solutions *before* analyzing each one? No idea is a bad idea!
- Evaluate the potential solutions; there is probably more than one that could work.
- Learn to compromise. The best solution will be a solution that works for everyone.

- Remember to pay attention to *how* you are speaking. What is your tone of voice? What does your body language convey? What words are you using?
- Listen for understanding, not for judging.
- Positive communication is not about winning, it’s about building loving relationships with your family.

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