

Open The Door to Good Communication

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Learn more about good communication: what it means and what it takes.

Good communication: it helps build relationships in good times, and mend relationships in difficult times. Family communication is a big part of what holds it together. It helps family members appreciate each other. It helps solve problems.

Consider these examples of poor communication.

Marie says her husband Philip never wants to talk about money issues. Philip says Marie always asks him when he’s just home from work, where he spends a lot of time on the phone taking orders.

Juan would like to communicate better with Fritz, but Fritz is extremely talkative. Juan doesn’t get a chance to offer suggestions at work because Fritz does not give him a chance to talk.

Zoey would like to remodel the kitchen. Her husband doesn’t think it is necessary. Each time she brings it up, he starts talking about when she crashed the car and the time she lost her purse.

What is the nature of the communication problem each of these people have? What do you think could be done to improve their communication?

Good communication is a two-way street. Sometimes an individual will state an opinion about something, then walk away, believing that the topic has been covered, when in reality the other person’s thoughts are still unstated. Listening is as important, if not more so, than talking. Focus on listening more and talking less.

Know when to talk. Sometimes a person just isn’t ready to talk about a certain issue. This is particularly true if a lot of emotion is involved. Explain that you are ready to listen, then wait until she or he is ready to talk. Trying to force the issue may create discomfort or even anger, and may not help with communication at all. Understand that some people like to talk out a situation in detail, and some find that more difficult. Accept individual differences.

Make communication a habit. Good communication habits are built over time. We can’t wait until something goes wrong and then expect family members to communicate with us. Talking and listening are big parts of family life and need to be on-going and regular parts of each family member’s day. Talk about the little stuff. Just talk. Then when big issues come along, talk is a natural part of the relationship.

Don’t slam the door on opportunities for communication. Avoid communication “door-slammers” that will stop any conversation in mid-sentence. Instead:

--Don’t stand in judgement of the speaker or his/her message. Accept it even if you disagree with it. Statements such as “You’re wrong,” or “I can’t believe you’re saying that,” or a sarcastic “Right!” will put the other person on the defensive and end the conversation. Think of ways to express your own values without ridiculing the other person’s ideas.

--Don’t yell. Anger doesn’t solve problems, it only makes them worse. If you find yourself getting angry, explain you need to cool down first, then come back and talk. Walk, run, listen to music, or use other means to calm yourself. Then do come back to talk.

--Don’t jump to conclusions. Most of us naturally filter everything through our own experiences. But be sure you consider the other person’s point of view and experiences, not just your own. Don’t assume that you know what he or she means without asking questions and working toward a mutual understanding of the issue.

--Don’t interrupt. Give him or her a chance to state a thought, then tell your own.

Use I messages. An *I* message is a way of talking to other people by starting with yourself. If we start out by saying “I think,” or “This is the way I feel about,” the other person is better able to hear what we are saying. If we start by saying “You always,” “You need to,” or “You never,” the other person may get defensive and slam the door on communication. Once you’ve said what you think or feel about a situation, say what you would like to have happen. In other words, suggest a possible solution. Here are some examples of *you* messages turned into *I* messages.

<p>You are terrible at money management. We’ll never get ahead the way you spend.</p>	<p><i>I’m concerned about our money management. Would you be willing to work with me on a budget for the family?</i></p>
<p>Why do <i>you</i> always leave so much junk in the family room?</p>	<p><i>It would be nice to have the family room in better order. Let’s try to figure out a better way to store these things.</i></p>
<p>You always leave the lid off the toothpaste. What a germey mess that is.</p>	<p><i>With all the colds going around, I’m concerned about the germs getting into the tooth paste tube. Can we make sure to put the lid on? Or maybe each person can have her or his own tube.</i></p>

Note that it takes more words to use the *I* messages, but it’s well worth the effort and leads to fewer disputes and better relationships. *I* messages are problem solvers.

Use a talking stick. In a dispute between two family members, or co-workers for that matter, it’s important that each get a chance to state an opinion, and have the floor. Without this opportunity, one may have his or her say and not let the other talk. To provide equal opportunities for both, use a small item that you trade back and forth, with the person holding the item having the floor. When that person finishes, the item is given to the other person, who then has the chance to talk. This avoids interruptions and backlashes. The item can be any small item that you agree on. Traditionally, it was a carved “talking stick.” You can get a small dowel and use this for your stick, or you can use a pencil, a toy, a button, or just a piece of paper. If it’s helpful, write the word “floor” on the paper to remind you that whoever has the paper has the “floor.”

Communication needs to be safe. Anyone who feels threatened, uneasy, or untrusting in any sense, cannot express the full nature of his or her concerns. True communication cannot take place if anyone feels taken advantage of, that what’s said will be used against him or her, or that others will be told about the conversation.

One issue at a time. Sometimes people talking about a problem will bring up other problems as well. Stick to one topic at a time. Solve that problem. Wait until another time to bring up another issue. If past hurts and problems come up every time something happens, then you live in the midst of disharmony all the time. The issue you want to settle may get lost in the shuffle. Sticking to one topic at a time really helps avoid this. The purpose of positive communication is not to blame a person for the past but to find ways to work together to make the future better.

Apply good communication skills at work, in organizations, and with family members. Some organizations have difficulty solving problems because of poor communications or because lots of time is spent complaining and little time spent problem-solving. When you come to the table to talk over an issue, don’t let it dissolve into a gripe session. Instead, for each complaint, search for possible solutions. Don’t draw out minute details about something that went wrong. Instead, define an issue and think of possible solutions, decide what could happen if you tried a solution, and choose a solution to try. This avoids personality conflicts and back-biting and leads to a more pleasant organization or work place.

Review

Now go back to the scenarios near the beginning of this guide. After reading the information, can you better define the types of communication problems they have? Are you better prepared to offer solutions for the communication issues?

Hints — Marie and Phillip’s communication is related to the paragraph *Know when to talk* and to the door slammer *Don’t interrupt*. Juan and Fritz’s communication is related to the paragraph *Good communication is a two-way street* and to the suggestion *Use a talking stick*. Zoey and her husband’s communication is related to the paragraph *One issue at a time*.

Background Information and Other Resources

University of Minnesota. *Parents Forever*. 2000
 Center for Divorce Education. *Children in the Middle*. Athens, Ohio. 2007
 Covey, S.R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Franklin Covey Co. New York. 2004

This publication has been peer-reviewed.

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