

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Improving Family Communication

Communication is the key to creating a family environment that is supportive and loving. All families have disagreements and conflicts. However, when family members feel they can express their feelings and thoughts openly and honestly, the family bond grows as does their respect for one another.

Effective communication is not as simple as it might seem on the surface. It is a skill that takes time, energy and practice to develop but one with immeasurable benefits for parents and children. It isn't always necessary to communicate more—just more effectively.

Elements of Communication

Effective communication is more than just talk. It involves really listening and appropriate, honest expression.

Listening

Parents can have the greatest impact on their children by how they listen rather than by what they say. When we listen to a person in an attentive way, it helps them feel valued and understood. Active listening is more than just hearing words. It involves picking up on the underlying emotions and concerns. The following are ways to make your listening (whether with your partner or children) more effective:

Take time to focus. Don't be too busy to listen. Stop what you are doing and give the speaker your undivided attention. Do not get distracted by television, telephone and other demands. Show your non-verbal support and interest by making eye contact, nodding or leaning forward while the other person speaks. All these things will help the speaker feel that what they have to say is important to you and that you are being attentive. Even if the subject seems minor to you, family members will be encouraged to come to you with bigger issues if you listen to the small ones.

Rephrase and ask questions. Being an effective listener means checking your interpretation of what you hear a person say. A good way to do this is to repeat in your own words what the speaker has said. Try putting it into question format so the other person can correct misinterpretation. This shows concern for what the speaker has to say and can clear up misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

Pay attention to non-verbal cues. It's estimated that 60 per cent to 75 per cent of communication is non-verbal. Pay attention to facial expressions, body positions, tone of voice, gestures and mannerisms. When non-verbal messages contradict what is being said, listeners may become confused. If this is the case, ask for clarification.

Practice tolerance and sensitivity. If we are listening effectively then we will respect what the person is saying even if we don't agree with it. Have an open mind and avoid becoming judgemental and defensive. If you take a curious "not knowing" position, it will encourage the speaker to be honest and open with you. On the other hand, if you take the position that the person is "wrong" or doesn't know what they are talking about, they will most likely limit their communication or withhold information. Be aware of not just the words the person is expressing but the feelings that are present as well.

Is the person angry, disappointed, sad, or frustrated? If you can tune into these emotions, you will get a much fuller picture of the message your family member is sending.

Expressing

Not only do family members need to listen effectively but they need to express themselves in a way that will not put others on the defensive or escalate conflict. Try some of the recommendations below:

Use "I" messages instead of "you" messages. A "you" message, such as "you always criticize me" is a direct attack. The listener will most likely become defensive and angry. A better approach would be to use an "I" message that expresses how you feel without blaming or putting down the listener. Try using this formula: "I feel…when you…". For example, “I feel angry when you leave the room in the middle of a conversation." From that starting point, problem solving and negotiation can take place.

Pay attention to your non-verbal cues. When expressing yourself, be aware of what messages you are sending by means of body language. For example, are you trying to encourage an open conversation with your fists clenched and arms crossed, while avoiding eye contact? Try to have your non-verbal messages match what you are saying. If they don’t, it may be that there are feelings you are not acknowledging or expressing.

Use self-disclosure. It’s okay to show your spouse or children that you are human. In fact, disclosing our own errors and vulnerability often makes it easier for others to relate to us and encourages open communication. Self-disclosure takes trust, but can increase intimacy and honesty in our relationships.

Express anger in appropriate ways. Family relationships are emotionally intense. Sometimes intense communication can lead to verbal or even physical abuse. This is never acceptable. Anger is normal and acceptable, but caution must be used in expressing it. If you or a family member are too angry to communicate effectively, take a "time out" and put off the discussion until some of the strong emotions have subsided. This means acknowledging your emotions or those of a family member and asking for a break.

Communication Do's

Often outside activities, friends and life demands can leave little time to talk. It can often seem easier to blame than to take time to discuss. Shortcuts, unclear messages and unresolved problems can escalate issues and diminish respect.

- Set aside some "quality time" each week for family members to talk. This can be as formal as a family meeting or can be worked into dinnertime or tuck-in time. Listen and watch family members for signs that they are ready to talk, even if it’s outside of the regular time frame.
- Model the communication you wish to see your children use. When children observe parents expressing anger with verbal aggression or physical attacks, they are more likely to imitate this behavior. Demonstrate respectful, non-abusive, effective ways of listening and speaking.
- Try to be honest and share feelings in a manner that is open and clear.
- Discuss values and beliefs regularly and take responsibility for personal thoughts and actions.
- Use age-appropriate ways of communicating with children. For instance, engage in playing, drawing, writing and building with younger children. By being attentive, you will learn to recognize and understand the meaning of your children's activities, facial expressions and body language. Dialog, problem-solving and reasoning are effective with older children and adolescents.
- Practice, practice, practice! Listening and communication skills do not happen overnight.

Communication Don'ts

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It’s easy to sabotage communication by falling in to old, negative habits. Watch for these common pitfalls:

- Don't interrupt others while they are speaking. If you find this difficult, try this exercise: place a spoon in the middle of the table. Each person picks up the spoon when they want to have their say. No one else is allowed to speak until the person replaces the spoon on the table.
- Don't use words like "always" or "never" when describing a family member's behavior. They are just not realistic and only aggravate the other person.
- Don't think your answer is the only answer. Consider another side of the story.
- Don't yell, threaten, whine or make personal attacks or demeaning comments. If the discussion seems too heated not to, take a break and cool off.

Being part of a family brings special rewards such as friendship, love and a sense of belonging. Good family relationships are built on strong communication skills and quality time. Take stock of your communications skills and try some of these techniques for improvement.