

Healthy Communication With Your Child

Guidelines for Parents



Many parents think that the main purpose of communication is to get information to their children. Telling children to eat their vegetables and reminding them to look both ways before crossing the street are expressions of love and caring. That is sending *information* about diet and safety. But communication has another important function. Communication is a two-way bridge that connects you and your child's feelings. Healthy communication—the kind that builds a strong two-way bridge—is crucial in helping your child develop a healthy personality and good relationships with you and others. It gives your child a chance to become a happy, safe, healthy person, no matter what happens. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed this brochure to help you understand what healthy communication is and how to practice it.

Why is healthy communication important?

Healthy communication is important because it helps your child:

- Feel cared for and loved
- Believe she matters and is important to you
- Feel safe and not all alone with his worries
- Learn to tell you what she feels and needs directly in words
- Learn how to manage his feelings safely so that he does not act on feelings without thinking (or overreact)
- Talk to you openly in the future

Healthy communication also helps you:

- Feel close to your child
- Know your child's needs
- Know you have powerful tools to help your child grow
- Manage your own stress and frustrations with your child

What are the building blocks of healthy communication?

Building the two-way bridge of communication requires:

- **Being available**—Children need to feel that their parents are available to them. This means being able to spend time with your child. Even spending 10 minutes a day communicating with each of your children alone makes the bridge of communication stronger. Being available also means quickly getting yourself into a quiet and “tuned-in” mood before you start listening to your child or talking about something important. Being able to understand and talk about *your* feelings as well as your child's is another important part of being available.
- **Being a good listener**—Being a good listener helps your child feel loved, even when he is upset and you can't do anything to fix the problem. Ask your child for his ideas and feelings before beginning to talk about yours. Also, try to understand exactly what he is saying to you. What your child is trying to tell you is important to him, even when it may not be to you. You do not have to agree with what your child is saying to be a good listener. It helps your child calm down, so later he can listen to you.

- **Showing empathy**—This means tuning in to your child and letting her know you appreciate her feelings. You can show empathy even if you disagree with your child. Empathy is about appreciating feelings for their own sake. It is not about who is right or wrong. Showing empathy means checking out whether you understand what your child is feeling. Ask whether your understanding of how she is feeling is right.
- **Being a good sender**—Be a good *listener* first. If your child already feels heard and cared for, he will be in a better mood to listen to you.

Make sure that what you say, your tone of voice, and what you do all send the same message. For example, if you laugh when you say “NO!”, your child will be confused and will not know what you really want.

Use *words* to communicate what you want your child to do. Even when setting limits with a toddler you can use words while holding him back.

Use feeling words when you praise your child's behavior. For example, you can say “I am so happy!” when your child puts away her toys. It is also helpful to use “you” and point out the good behavior (as in “You have done a great job with your homework!”). Encourage your child to praise herself as well. Praise helps children get through the bad times.

Use “I” statements to tell your child what displeases you about her behavior. For example, saying “When I couldn't find you, I felt worried and angry” is better than saying in an angry tone “You disappeared! Where were you?” Tell your child what you feel and think. Don't tell your child what she should think or feel.

- **Being a good role model**—Young children learn better by copying what their parents do than by being told. Children will copy your way of communicating. If you yourself use a lot of feeling words, it will help your child to learn to do the same. When parents use feeling words instead of screaming, doing something hurtful, or calling someone a name, children learn that using feeling words is a better way to deal with strong feelings. Saying feelings rather than acting on them helps children control themselves. You can help your child learn to label his feelings by deciding what feeling words are OK to say at home or in school.

The flip side of healthy communication: verbal abuse

Children usually bounce back quickly when they are hurt. For example, your child may cry when she falls and scrapes a knee, but ten minutes later she has forgotten all about the fall and is running outside again. The same thing might happen when someone at school calls your child a name. If it only happens once, your child will probably forget it. However, children who suffer the same type of hurts over and over again do not bounce back quickly. Children who are verbally abused are deeply hurt by what their parents say and by how they say it.

What is verbal abuse?

There are three kinds of verbal abuse:

- **Name-calling, frequent criticism, and blaming:** Criticism is making “you” statements and calling your child names. For example, saying “You are stupid” is name-calling and criticism; saying “I am upset with you and I wish you would stop doing that” is not. Criticizing, name-calling, and blaming only make things worse in the long run.
- **Violating children’s boundaries, yelling, threatening to hurt or abandon them, and lying:** Sometimes, a parent’s strong emotions are too much for a young child to handle. Children build walls between themselves and their parents when this happens. Children who back up, hide, or put their hands over their ears are often trying to protect themselves from too much strong emotion. They are usually not trying to show disrespect.

Children are not little adults. They cannot block out screaming and loudness the way adults can. Loud talking or yelling while standing over children makes them feel very scared and unsafe. It hurts their emotions, just as physical abuse hurts their bodies and emotions. Yelling and loudness are even more hurtful when children are tired, sick, hungry, or scared about something. The younger the child is, the more this is true.

Children believe threats of harm or threats that you will leave them. Threats scare children more than you can imagine. They do not help your child behave better.

Lying also violates your child’s boundaries. Children will believe lies because they do not usually have enough information to be able to tell lies from the truth.

- **Silence**—Children feel long silences (hours or days) very strongly. They do not know what these silences mean. Children read horrible things into their parents’ silences. Silence sends a strong message of anger or dislike. It makes your child feel confused and helpless. If you are silent because you are depressed, it is better to tell your child that you are sad or ill and that it is not about him. When you are silent, you are not being a good sender.

Parents may get silent because:

- They are afraid that they will say something that will make things worse.
- They do not know what to say or do.
- They have such strong feelings of anger or sadness that they can’t talk.
- They are ill.
- Their own parents used silence to control them.

Parents verbally abuse children because they:

- Never learned healthy communication.
- Do not know other ways to control their children’s behavior.
- Do not know that children are hurt by verbal abuse and that it makes things worse.
- Have not learned how to manage their own strong feelings.
- Are under a lot of stress.
- Think their children need to develop a “thick skin” to survive.
- Were treated the same way by their parents, teachers, and other adults.

Preventing verbal abuse: handling parental stress and anger

Parenting is a very hard job. There are times when you will feel so stressed that you think you can’t handle one more thing. At those times, a crying baby, a toddler throwing a temper tantrum, or a fifth-grader refusing to do her homework might push you over the edge. It is important to find ways to help your child to behave that do not involve hurting her feelings. It is also important to find ways to prevent stress, and to calm yourself down when you are stressed, so that you do not say or do something harmful to your child.

Here are some things you might do to calm yourself:

- Take a few deep breaths very slowly.
- Wait 5 minutes before starting to talk to your child.
- Try to find a word to label your feeling.
- Say it to yourself or write it down.
- Share your feelings with your spouse or another adult. Call a friend.
- Keep your attention on the present. Don’t add up past problems.

Parents who are under a lot of stress may find it hard to control strong feelings like anger, fear, frustration, or helplessness. They may not realize that their anger is a reaction to feeling worried, confused, hurt, or overwhelmed with stress. For example, you would probably feel worried if your child got lost in the supermarket. If you were in a rush, you might be angry when you find her. You might yell at your child for having wandered away instead of saying “I was worried that I might not find you!” When you can learn to calm down and figure out what is really making you angry, you can avoid hurting your child out of anger.

Some people find that using the RETHINK © method helps them control their anger before they say or do something they might regret.

RETHINK © stands for:

Recognize your feelings.

Empathize with the other person.

Think of the situation differently. Use humor.

Hear what the other person is saying.

Integrate your love with your angry thoughts.

Notice your body’s reaction to feeling anger and to calming down.

Keeep your attention on the present problem.

Using RETHINK © can help you get control over your anger before you lash out at your child. If using the RETHINK © method or trying other ways to calm yourself does not work, try talking to your spouse, your pediatrician, or a counselor, minister, parent, or close friend. There is nothing to be ashamed of in admitting you need help in controlling your anger. All parents get frustrated and angry with their children. Asking for help with the difficult job of parenting is *always* better than losing control.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

