



## Grandparents as Parents: Bridging the Communication Gap

One of the most difficult gaps to bridge between generations is the communication gap. We have heard or perhaps said it ourselves: “I just can’t communicate with you,” “We’re just not communicating,” or “We’re just not on the same wavelength.” Whether we realize it or not, it is impossible *not* to communicate when two or more people are together. We spend 70 percent of our time communicating. There are many ways to communicate other than verbal communication. Without saying a word, we communicate through body language, gestures, mannerisms, and facial expressions.

Most often, when people express feelings about the lack of ability to communicate, they are protesting about ineffective communication. One person is not really understanding what the other person is saying or feeling.

One of the keys to strengthening family relationships is effective communication, which takes time and effort. It is not something that just happens; it is something that every family member has to work toward.

### **The Elements of Communication**

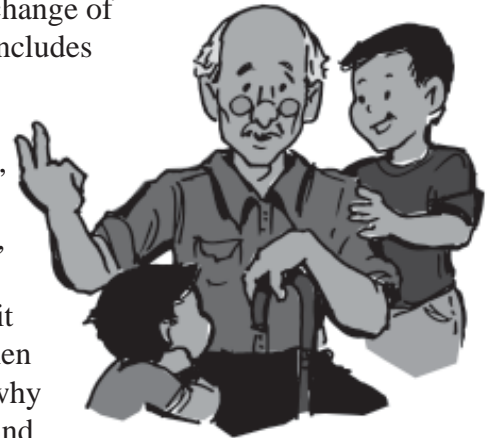
The process by which people exchange information, ideas, messages, and feelings to one another is communication. It is also what we say and how we say it. The key to making communication effective is to express yourself effectively, and try to understand what the other person is saying.

At the most basic level of interpersonal communication, there are three definite components:

- a sender, who is the person talking and trying to send a message;
- a message, which is the idea or information being communicated; and
- a receiver, who is the person listening and for whom the message is intended.

There is much more to communication between two people than just an exchange of words. It includes

gestures, facial expressions, posture, voice tone, what is said, how it is said, when it is said, why it is said, and what isn’t said.



These are important components in how the message is sent. In order for the sender to know how the message was received, the receiver must give some feedback. Feedback, or reflective listening, mirrors what the receiver is hearing the sender say. Whether by verbal or nonverbal response, the most effective feedback concentrates on not just the words being spoken but also the feelings and nonverbal portions of the message.

## Nonverbal Communication

Researchers estimate that in face-to-face communication, only 30 to 35 percent of the meaning of the message is carried through the verbal portion of the exchange. That leaves 65 to 70 percent to be carried by the nonverbal portion. A sensitivity to both nonverbal and verbal messages is necessary for effective communication.

When the verbal and nonverbal messages are in contrast to one another, the receiver will give the nonverbal message more consideration than the verbal message. For example, if you tell someone everything is all right and you love them, but your arms are folded across your chest and your fists are clenched, the receiver will probably not believe your words. In addition, while the receiver must be sensitive to the nonverbal messages of the sender, the receiver must also be aware of his or her own nonverbal messages.



can speak about 125 words per minute, but we can hear about 400 words per minute. This tends to create a situation where, rather than really listening to what is being said, we tend to think ahead of the person who is speaking. We may assume we know what they are going to say, or we may think about what we want to say when it's our turn to speak. Causing further distraction, the other person may also say something that causes us to think about something else.

After "listening" to someone, we usually only remember about half of what they said. We need to make an extra effort to stop thinking ahead and really listen to what is being said. Make eye contact with the sender, which is a sure sign that you are listening. Get rid of any distractions, such as a newspaper, magazine, or TV, that may draw your attention away from what is being said.

## Listening

The most important component of effective communication is listening. In addition to hearing the words being spoken, good listeners also pay attention to unspoken communication, such as body position, movements, tenseness or relaxation, gestures, and facial expressions. Good listening is comprised of four basic components: concentration, tolerance, rephrasing, and sensitivity.

*Concentration* is one of the most difficult components to deal with because we can listen much faster than the other person can talk. We

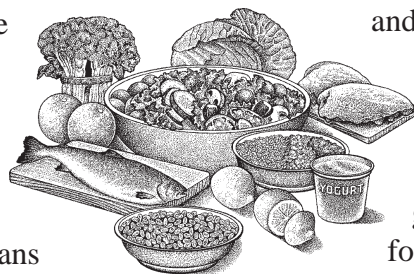
must be *tolerant* of what the other person is saying. We may lose interest in what is being said, or we may be making judgments and feeling defensive about what is being said. We need to be sure we are truly listening rather than questioning, blaming, or offering advice to the sender. When people receive negative feedback and feel their thoughts and feelings are being attacked, they will stop communication, limit communication, or withhold information for fear of receiving further negative responses.

Another component of listening effectively is feedback. To be an effective listener, you may need to periodically make sure you understand what the sender is saying. This can be done by

## Put Iron in Your Grandchild's Diet

Children need extra iron because they are growing rapidly. It is difficult for one- to three-year-olds to get the iron they need from their diets.

Offer your grandchildren foods high in iron, such as meat, dried beans



and peas, whole grains, enriched and fortified breads and cereals, and dark green vegetables.

Ask your doctor if your grandchild needs iron pills, and follow the doctor's instructions.

*rephrasing*, in your own words, what the sender said. Begin your question statement with, “Do you mean . . .?” or “I understand you to say . . .”. This lets the sender know you understand or are trying to understand what they are saying, and you are interested in what they have to say.

The final component of effective listening is *sensitivity*. Pay attention not only to the words spoken but also to the feelings expressed. Watch the nonverbal cues the sender is giving.

Sometimes, to be more sensitive, we must ask probing questions. Ask open-ended questions to encourage the sender to provide additional general information rather than specific information. An example of an open-ended question would be, “How do you feel about your new teacher?”

Sometimes we may need to take another approach to our probing questions by reflecting the sender’s emotions. This may be done as simply as saying, “You seem to be upset. What can I do to help you?” By doing this, you acknowledge the sender’s feelings, which allows the sender to talk further, thus giving you insight into how you can perhaps help solve the problem at hand.

In summary, to be an effective listener, there are several steps to follow:

- When someone is speaking, concentrate on what they are actually saying. Don’t think ahead of that person, assuming you know what he or she is going to say.
- Don’t think about what you are going to say until it is your turn to speak.
- Get rid of any distractions, and pay attention. Don’t pretend you are listening when you’re not.
- Be sensitive. Pay attention to nonverbal messages as well as the spoken words.

- Don’t make judgments about what the person is saying.
- Truly listen. Don’t question, blame, or offer advice.
- Give feedback. Make sure you understand what the sender is saying.
- Make eye contact. Reassure the speaker that you are listening.

### Communicating with Children

As a grandparent, one of the most difficult tasks you may face will be communicating with your grandchildren. It is important to talk *with* children, not at them. Talking at them is a one-sided conversation, such as, “Put on your shoes,” or “Don’t spill that.” Talking with them is a two-sided conversation that allows you to talk and then allows them to talk while you listen.

Instilling this habit of talking with children and not at them can be extremely beneficial, especially as they go into their teen years. We

must learn new skills that will work with today’s children, because techniques and skills used in the past generally don’t work well with today’s youth.



Accepting the child’s feelings is one of the challenges we face. Have you ever

been around when a child has fallen down, perhaps skinning his or her knee, and begins to cry? The words of consolation offered to the child were, “Oh, you’re really not hurt. It’s just a scratch. You’ve got to be tough. Now stop crying.”

What has just happened? The child was told that his or her feelings are not valid. This can confuse and also make the child angry, because the pain is very real to him or her.

Put yourself in the child’s place, and ask yourself these questions: “Would I be in pain and

maybe feel like crying?” and “Would I want some words of comfort rather than having someone tell me that my feelings are not important?” Just as people experience feelings of physical pain, such as the pain felt from a skinned knee, people experience emotional feelings—feelings such as anger, frustration, and joy. Sometimes the emotional feelings are the ones we have the most trouble understanding.

We need to accept and respect the feelings of children. When they are trying to express their feelings, we need to listen effectively and pay attention. To make sure they know you are listening, you should acknowledge their feelings. This may be as simple as saying, “Oh,” or “I see.”

When children are expressing positive feelings, such as “I made 100 percent on my spelling test!” it’s not hard to respond with, “That’s wonderful.” We have trouble dealing with the negative emotions. A lot of the time, children don’t know why they are having the feelings they are having. Then, when the adult begins to ask, “Why are you acting this way? What is wrong with you?” it only adds to their distress. Many times, it is how you say something rather than what you say that can cause added distress. It is much easier for children to talk to an adult who accepts their feelings rather than someone who seems to be interrogating them.

You don’t have to agree with children’s feelings, but you do need to acknowledge them.

### **I- and You-Messages**

A very effective way to communicate feelings and thoughts is to use “I-messages.”

I-messages are factual statements that allow the speaker to describe the problem or inappropriate behavior in a non-accusing manner and to explain how this affects them. For

### ***For inspiration . . .***

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched; they must be felt with the heart.

*Helen Keller*

example, you could say, “I get really embarrassed when you scream at me.”

I-messages can also be used to express positive feelings and appreciation, such as “I really appreciate your help picking up the toys.” Many people have been taught that an expression of feelings is a show of immaturity, impoliteness, or weakness. As a result, many people have learned to deny and repress their true feelings.

The use of I-messages can provide a way for people to express their real feelings. You-messages can be taken as a direct attack on the person being spoken to or as an accusation, causing that person to become very defensive or ready to fight back. Examples include, “You’re lazy,” “It’s all your fault,” and “Can’t you do anything right?” If you are trying to communicate effectively, this is one sure way to close all avenues of communication and cooperation.

If someone is too angry to participate in effective communication, it is better to acknowledge the feelings and emotions, and put off the discussion until the person has had time to calm down. You could simply say, “I know you are upset, but it is very difficult to talk about it right now. Can we talk about this in a few minutes?”

Acknowledging the other person and his or her feelings in a nonthreatening way helps keep the lines of communication open.

**See the Texas AgriLife Extension Service Grandparents Raising Grandkids website for more information:**

<http://grandparentsraisinggrandkids.tamu.edu>

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