

Communication: A Key Ingredient in Developing Healthy Caregiver–Child Relationships

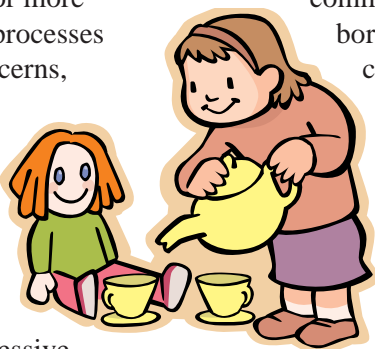
by Stephen Green, Ph.D.

What is communication, and why does it play such an important role in building strong relationships? Communication simply refers to the exchange of verbal and non-verbal information between two or more individuals. It is through communication processes that we express our needs, wants, and concerns, as well as our love and admiration for one another. Just as effective communication is almost always found in healthy relationships, poor communication is typically associated with unhealthy relationships. Family researchers have discovered that poor communication can lead to numerous problems, including excessive conflict, ineffective problem solving, lack of intimacy, weak emotional bonding, and behavioral problems in children (Bray and Heatherington, 1993).

As child care providers, you have a unique opportunity to shape the lives of the children in your care. Numerous factors contribute to a child's growth and development; however, among the most important are the daily interactions that take place between you and the child. Communication processes lie at the heart of these daily interactions. Being an effective communicator, especially with young children, requires patience, understanding, and practice.

Practical Strategies for Promoting Healthy Communication Patterns

Research on early brain development indicates that it is extremely important for parents and caregivers to begin communicating with children from the day they are born (if not before). Talking to a child, singing to a child, reading to a child, and touching a child are all forms of communication that stimulate a child's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. As children grow older, their ability to communicate and their knowledge of the rules of communication rapidly expand. The following suggestions are intended to help you communicate more effectively with the children in your care.



- **Think about who you are communicating with.** Communicating with children, especially very young children, requires a unique set of skills and a basic understanding of child development. Children can be effective communicators; however, they are limited by their developmental capacities. For example, a newborn cannot verbally articulate his need for a diaper change. Instead, he communicates this need through crying. Understanding where a child lies on the developmental spectrum can prevent adults from having unrealistic expectations concerning a child's language and comprehension abilities. It is also important to

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communicate on the same level as the child. Using language that children understand helps facilitate communication. This can also be done by physically coming down to the child's level (e.g., bending down on one knee so that face-to-face interaction can take place).

- **Pay attention to non-verbal messages.** We (adults and children) communicate very strong messages through our non-verbal behavior. Facial expressions, body posture, hand gestures, and tone of voice are all examples of non-verbal communication. You can enhance your ability to communicate with children by paying close attention to children's non-verbal messages. Children do not always possess the vocabulary necessary to articulate their emotions; therefore, it is important to learn to interpret non-verbal behavior, as well as seek clarification when you are unclear how a child feels. Also, it is helpful to understand the impact of your own non-verbal messages. For example, an angry glare can have the same impact as a harsh word.
 - **Be an active listener.** An essential aspect of effective adult-child communication is the ability and/or willingness to listen to what children have to say. Being an active listener involves trying one's best to understand the perspective of the other person. When you actively listen to a child, you acknowledge and respect her point of view. For example, when listening to a child, you can nod your head or say, "I understand," which conveys to the child that what she has to say is important. Another aspect of active listening is seeking clarification from a child when the message is not understood. This can be done by simply asking, "What did you mean when you said...?" or "Help me understand what you are saying."
 - **Communicate frequently.** In order for you to build strong relationships with the children in your care, you must communicate with them on a regular basis. Frequent communication will help you better understand the unique needs of each child. This means that you must create opportunities to talk and listen to children. Communication can take place in a wide variety of situations (e.g., while playing on the playground, at the lunch table, etc.).
 - **Communicate clearly and directly.** Effective communication is clear and direct. This means that the intended message can be clearly understood by the listener and is directed at the appropriate target
- **Use "I" messages.** I-messages are statements that reflect what a sender is thinking or feeling at a particular moment. These statements are typically non-threatening and non-judgmental. I-messages stand in contrast to You-messages, which often put down, blame, and nag children (Dinkmeyer, McKay, and Dinkmeyer, 1989). For example, you may say to a child, "You did a bad job of picking up those toys." In contrast, using an I-message you could say, "I think you could have put more effort into picking up those toys." I-messages tend to be phrased more positively and encourage cooperation.
 - **Emphasize the positive.** While it is often necessary to address problematic behavior with children, effective communication is primarily positive. Healthy relationships are usually characterized by more positive than negative interactions. Positive messages tend to build relationships, whereas, frequent negative messages tend to tear them down.
 - **Model effective communication skills.** If you want the children in your care to develop effective communication skills, you must be willing to model these skills for them. If you want them to listen, you must listen to them. If you want them to communicate their thoughts clearly and directly, then you must communicate your thoughts and feelings in a clear and direct manner. If you model effective communication skills for the children in your care, you will be amazed at how quickly they follow your lead.

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Practical Ways to Build a Child's Self-Esteem

by Stephen Green, Ph.D.

Self-esteem simply refers to how a person feels about him or herself. Researchers have discovered that there is a noticeable difference in the characteristics of children with high (healthy) self-esteem and those with low (unhealthy) self-esteem. For the most part, children with a high self-esteem tend to be happier, more confident, and less afraid of failure. These children tend to take more risks, and when they do fail at a task, they tend to bounce back and try again. The opposite is true for children with a low self-esteem. Following are some practical ways you, as a child care provider, can help build a child's self-esteem.

- **Love and appreciate the children in your care.** The foundation for a child's self-esteem begins very early. For very young children, self-esteem is based on feelings of being loved, accepted, and valued (Katz, 1993). When you talk to them, sing to them, read to them, hold them, and compliment them regularly, you communicate a strong message that you care for them and value them for who they are.
- **Compliment children's efforts.** Children thrive on the encouragement they receive from their parents and primary caregivers. You have a great opportunity to bolster the self-esteem of many young children by praising them when they make efforts toward accomplishing various tasks (e.g., crawling, walking, talking, reading, writing, holding a spoon).
- **Provide opportunities for children to experience success.** Giving children tasks that are within their abilities promotes success. However, unrealistic expectations for success can set children up for failure. When you expect children to succeed and you give them reasonable opportunities to succeed, odds are they will succeed.
- **Help children cope with occasional negative feedback and frustrations.** As important as it is for children to experience success, it is equally important for them to learn how to cope with occasional negative feedback and frustrations (Katz, 1993). You can help



children in this regard by helping them understand that success on every occasion is not possible and that we all experience some failures. In such cases, you may respond, "I know you're disappointed, but you can try again tomorrow."

- **Allow children to make meaningful decisions.** Children are more likely to have their self-confidence enhanced when adults in their lives allow them to make some meaningful decisions and choices (within certain limits, of course).
- **Examine your own self-esteem.** Children are keen observers of human behavior. As a result, they tend to model behavior they witness on a regular basis. If you have a low self-esteem, it will be difficult for you to help a child develop a healthy self-esteem. Therefore, examine your own perceptions of yourself, and take the necessary steps to improve your own self-image.
- **Discipline in a positive way.** The disciplinary strategies/techniques that you use with the children in your care can have a big impact on their self-esteem. Frequent yelling and criticism of a child can have the effect of lowering his self-esteem, whereas, positive discipline, such as setting and enforcing appropriate limits, can build up a child's self-esteem.
- **Focus on what children do right.** As individuals who are in constant contact with young children, it is very easy to focus on the undesirable behaviors of children and lose focus of what they do right. It is important for you to correct disobedient behavior, but it is equally important to point out when children are behaving appropriately. There are numerous opportunities throughout the day for you to point out the positive behaviors of children. You may just have to look a little harder.

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Tips for Teaching Good Behavior

by Dave Riley, Ph.D.

Punishing a child might stop a bad behavior, but it doesn't teach a child how to do things right. Here are some things you can do to promote good behavior and self-control.

Tell her what you want her to do. Avoid saying "don't" all the time (this **isn't** teaching), and instead tell what or how to do something properly (this **is** teaching). For example, instead of saying "Don't drag your coat on the floor," you could say "Carry your coat over your shoulder like this, so it doesn't get dirty."

Plan ahead. Before any field trip or special activity, tell the children what is planned, what will happen, and how you want them to behave. You'll be amazed how much this helps!

Tell—don't ask. If the child doesn't really have a choice, then don't give one. Say, "It's time to put the toys away now," not "Do you want to put your toys away?"

Make it fun. Help your preschoolers want to do what they have to do. If you want them to pick up the toys, make it a game that you play together. If they have to wait in line, sing a song together.



Set things up to make good behavior easy. Move things to a high shelf, or put them away if you don't want small hands touching them. Organize transitions so children don't have to wait in line or sit quietly for impossible lengths of time. Use plastic bins to make toy pick-up easy. Use daily routines so children learn what to expect, what to do next. You get the idea.

Catch the child being good, and encourage him. We often forget to do this! Encouraging him for good behavior helps him understand what you want. Don't let the child think you only notice him when he misbehaves, or he will misbehave more and more to get your attention!

Give her another idea. When a child is doing something you don't want her to do, suggest something else she might do instead. "You can throw the ball outside but not in the classroom." "You can pour water in this tub but not on the floor." "If you want to pound, come over to the carpentry area."



Offer real choices. Sometimes offering a choice allows a toddler to exercise his autonomy and learn to cooperate at the same time. If you tell a boy to put on his jacket, he may say "no," but he will probably stop and think if you ask, "Do you want to wear the red jacket or the blue one?" Try this one during toy pick-up: "Would you rather put those in the box or in the basket?"

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