



Keys to Effective Father–Child Communication

What is communication, and why is it such an integral part of family life? Communication, in the context of the family, simply refers to the exchange of verbal and non-verbal information between two or more family members. It is through communication processes that parents and children express their needs, wants, concerns, as well as their love and admiration for one another. Just as effective communication is almost invariably found in healthy families, poor communication is typically associated with unhealthy family relationships. Researchers have discovered that poor communication can lead to numerous family problems, including excessive family conflict, ineffective problem solving, lack of intimacy, weak emotional bonding, and behavioral problems in children (Bray and Heatherington, 1993).

As parents, fathers have a unique opportunity to shape the lives of their children. Numerous factors contribute to a child's growth and development; however, among the most important are the daily interactions that take place between a father and child. Communication processes lie at the heart of these daily interactions. Fathers, husbands, and men in general, are often portrayed as not being good communicators, yet it is obvious that fathers are capable of communicating effectively with their children. Being an effective communicator, especially with young children, requires patience, understanding, and practice.

Practical Strategies for Promoting Healthy Communication Patterns

Communication between a parent and child begins very early. Research on early brain development indicates that it is extremely important for parents 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 fathers communicate more effectively with their children.

- i **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. A basic understanding of where a child lies on the developmental spectrum can prevent a father from having unrealistic expectations concerning his child's language and comprehension abilities. A related recommendation for fathers is that they communicate on the same level as their 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).
- i **Pay attention to non-verbal messages.** Parents and children communicate very strong messages through their non-verbal behavior. Facial expressions, body posture, hand gestures, and tone of voice are all examples of non-verbal communication. Fathers can enhance their ability to communicate with their children by paying close attention to their children's non-verbal messages. Children do not always possess the vocabulary necessary to articulate their emotions; therefore, it is imperative that fathers learn to interpret non-verbal behavior, as well as seek clarification when they are unclear how their children feel. Also, it is extremely important that fathers understand the impact of their own non-verbal messages. For example, an angry glare from a father can have the same impact as a harsh word.

- i **Be an active listener.** An essential aspect of effective parent-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 listening to a child, it is extremely important to pay close attention to his verbal and non-verbal messages. Fathers who actively listen to their children acknowledge and respect their children's point of view. For example, when listening to a child, a father can nod his head or say, "I understand," which conveys to the child that what he 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."
- i **Communicate frequently.** In order to for a father to develop a strong relationship with his children, he must communicate with them on a regular basis. Frequent communication enables a father to know the needs of his children. Fathers, whether they live with their children or not, must create opportunities to talk and listen to their children. Communication can take place in a wide variety of settings (e.g., at the dinner table, in the car, on the telephone, at bedtime, through letters, etc.).
- i **Communicate clearly and directly.** Fathers who are effective at communicating with their children are those who are clear and direct. This means that the intended message can be clearly understood by the listener and is directed at the appropriate target (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, and Keitner, 1993). Children will be much more likely to develop effective communication skills if their fathers model and encourage clarity and directness.
- i **Use "I" messages.** I-messages are statements that reflect what a sender is thinking or feeling at a particular moment. I-messages focus on the parent, rather than the child. 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, a father may say to a child, "You did a bad job on your homework." The same parent using an I-message, could have said, "I think you could have put more effort into your homework." I-messages tend to be phrased more positively and encourage cooperation.
- i **Emphasize the positive.** While it is often necessary to address problematic behavior with children, effective communication is primarily positive. Family researchers have discovered that unhappy family relationships are often the result of negative communication patterns (e.g., criticism, contempt, defensiveness). Psychologist, John Gottman, has found that satisfied married couples maintain a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions (Gottman, 1994). In other words, couples who tend to be very dissatisfied with their relationships tend to engage in more negative than positive communication. This basic principle can also be applied to father-child relationships. Positive messages tend to build relationships, whereas, frequent negative messages tend to tear them down.
- i **Model effective communication skills.** If fathers want their children to develop effective communication skills, they must be willing to model these skills for their children. If fathers want their children to listen, they must listen to their children. If fathers want their children to communicate their thoughts clearly and directly, then fathers must communicate their thoughts and feelings in a clear and direct manner.

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