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Communicating with Children: You Make the Difference

By Meline M. Kevorkian

It's easy to spend time with your family and not talk at all. Many parents and kids often are attached to cell phones and iPods and, although just a few feet from each other, never exchange a word. Research suggests, however, that just talking about school can have a significant impact on your child's achievement.

Remember that kids learn in homes that learn, from parents who value learning. Sit down with your kids and talk about what they have learned in school and what they plan to achieve. Be familiar with school policies and stay informed about your child's progress. Don't wait for teachers to contact you; take the initiative. Families who stay informed about their children's progress at school have higher-achieving children.

Talking with your children is one of the most critical steps of healthy parenting. Young children begin their life fascinated by language and communication. To the small child, a mother's or father's words are important, comforting, and soothing. Use this to your advantage. Start intimate communication early on about everything and you have a greater chance of continuing this communication into the teen years.

Remember, though, communicating thoughts and ideas is not a skill you or your children are born with. The art of self-expression must be learned. Give kids ways to talk about how they feel. Let them know how important they are and that you want to hear what they have to say. Honesty and openness must be commended. Include your children in family discussions when appropriate. When talking is part of the daily routine, it becomes easier to deal with difficult subjects.

Here are 10 simple rules you can use to open the lines of communication with your children, getting them to listen and to tell you more.

Rule #1: Listen! Listen! Listen!

When your children want to talk, stop everything. If you continue what you were doing, they will think you don't care and don't have time for them. Avoid jumping in and not letting them vent or discuss their concerns, worries, and fears. In life, sometimes we all need a shoulder to cry on. At times, we don't even want advice or comments. Other times, we just want to be heard and to feel like someone shares our pain. A silent and sympathetic ear is sometimes the best thing we can give to our children.

Here are a few words that show we are listening:

- Tell me more!
- I know.
- Wow!
- That is just awful.
- I am here.
- Go ahead; let it out.

Rule #2: Remember, there is power in choice.

When you are talking to your children, give them a choice whenever possible. Allow them to feel you are talking with them and asking them rather than talking at them and telling them. Make conversations a two-way street rather than a power struggle.

Rule #3: Avoid untrue statements and things said out of anger and frustration.

Your children will learn to listen and believe when you speak to them truthfully and calmly. Trust and respect come from honesty and sincerity. If you don't mean it, don't say it.

Rule #4: Be a source of encouragement.

When your children confide in you, they should feel relieved, inspired, and recharged, rather than guilty or that they are a source of disappointment to you. When they come to you with a problem or situation, offer your ear as well as words of encouragement.

The following are examples of words of encouragement:

- I know you can handle it.
- Every problem has a solution, even this.
- Think it over; you will figure this out.
- I am here to help you.
- I went through this at your age, like when...

Rule #5: Make your conversations places of comfort.

Try to step away from being the parent when listening, and put yourself in your child's shoes. Think about how difficult the conversation may be for your child, and think before you react.

Rule #6: Avoid the 20 questions or drill routine.

Try not to take over the conversation. If children share something with you and feel like they are being scolded or like they are disappointing you, they probably will not let it happen again. As a parent, there will be times when you must address an issue your child discusses with you; be sure you address the behavior or action and not the child.

Rule #7: Make a point of being the initiator.

Out of the blue, follow up on a previous subject of interest before your child comes to you. This reinforces for your child that you care and also brings you into your child's circle.

Rule #8: Take time to share.

A busy parent is not always the best parent. Drop everything and do something spontaneous like taking in a movie on a school night or doing homework in the park.

Rule #9: Apologize when you are wrong.

If you say something or do something you probably shouldn't have, say you are sorry. Admit that you too are human and make mistakes.

Rule #10: Love Them!

Don't just love them...tell them you love them. Show them affection just as you did when they were small. Bake a cake for no occasion, play a game, take a walk after dinner. Show your love by showing them there is no better time spent than with them.

Children model the behavior of parents. How you express and handle yourself will usually determine how your children will as well. Speaking honestly and clearly, responding calmly, and listening carefully will occur only if children are provided with models and opportunities to practice. Kids need to learn to share more than just their belongings. They need to feel comfortable sharing their feelings, thoughts, and ideas.

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A PTA Good Idea: Collaborate to Focus on Family Communication

by Joan Kuersten

Katherine, a single parent, had tried three different strategies to get her two daughters to pick up their room; none of them worked, and she often ended up fighting with her two girls and feeling that she was a bad parent. Such a scenario is all too familiar, according to Maryanne Taylor, a social worker in the Derry (NH) Cooperative School District. "Many times, parents feel they're the only ones struggling with an issue when, in fact, there are lots of other parents dealing with the same thing," she noted.

Taylor, along with Alicia Triplett and Pam Richards, the district's other social workers, developed a series of parent education workshops that were approved by the school district staff and supported by the PTAs in the district. In October 2003, the Family Relationship series debuted with the topic "Building a Relationship for Life: Infancy Through Adolescence and Beyond." Targeted to the parents of 3rd-, 4th-, and 5th-graders, the workshop focused on playing with children to strengthen family bonds.

Five more workshops were conducted over the next six months. Two dealt with play, while the remaining three focused on communicating with kids, dealing with negative media messages, and responding to bullying. All six of the one-and-a-half-hour workshops were held in the evening—the location rotated between the five district schools—and contained a child component: children either participated directly with parents in the workshop or engaged in a related activity in an adjoining room. The presenters and facilitators, who were from community agencies that worked in the area of family support and/or parent education, donated their services. Workshops were publicized through fliers sent home with students and notices in school and PTA newsletters, in the local newspaper, and on the district cable-TV network. The series was offered again in 2004–2005, scaled down to three workshops, and will be offered this school year as well.