

Parenting

COMMUNICATING

WITH YOUR CHILDREN



If your child has severe industrial deafness that is miraculously cured when you whisper about ice-cream, don't despair. You don't have to buy a cattle prod or develop lungs like Pavarotti. There are other strategies to restore communication.



Imagine you come home and say, "I had a tough day at work." What if your partner said, "Oh, there there, you poor little fella", "Right, I'm picking up that phone right now and I'm going to tell your boss a thing or two", "Aw no, I've told you before, what you should do is . . ." or, "Let's watch some TV."? You know how you'd feel. So why do some parents think patronising, taking over, lecturing or distracting is what their children want when they talk? What about *listening*? Encourage them to talk. Understand and empathise. Listen actively, check that you understand, then keep quiet for about three times longer than you think they need to get to the point. This kind of listening is a great example for your children. Perhaps it's the first step in helping them communicate.

None of what follows is radically new. It's just reminding us parents to treat children as *people*—because they are.

(What a radical idea!)

I said, tidy your room!

How do you talk so children will listen? Here are some tips.

- **DON'T EVER BE RUDE**

But be assertive. (See our *Relationships* course, "Conflict management" for a reminder of what assertiveness is, as opposed to aggressiveness or submissiveness.)

- **USE THEIR NAME**

(After all, you gave it to them.) Use the whole name if you really want to have serious effect.

- **POLITELY DEMAND TO BE HEARD**

Reinforce this. Stop. Physically remove any distractions. Mute the TV or turn off whatever electronic gadget you need to. Touch them lightly if necessary (no pinching or punching, even on the first day of the month). This is better than shouting for many reasons. It teaches your children to listen to normal speech, not just shouting. It's less stressful for you. And the neighbours will thank you.

.....

**"ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILDREN
TO TALK, UNDERSTAND AND
EMPATHISE."**

.....



- **CONTROL YOURSELF**

Am I the only one who has watched a father bellowing, “CALM DOWN!” I wanted to walk up and say, “Why don’t you show them how?” (But I didn’t say that. I like my nose the shape it is.)

- **MAKE SURE YOU HAVE THEIR ATTENTION BEFORE YOU START**

Don’t shout from another room without checking if they have headphones on or are concentrating on TV or homework. You wouldn’t respond either.

- **DON’T TALK TOO MUCH**

Don’t launch into a full account of your day, your family history and the meaning of life before telling them you’d like them to come for dinner. Get to the point.

- **DON’T TALK DOWN TO THEM**

Or over their heads. Make your requests clear, simple and age-appropriate. For example, if you tell a three-year-old, “Sit quietly for five minutes,” that’s not clear. Does “quietly” mean they can talk without shouting and keep playing as long as they’re sitting down? How long is five minutes anyway? And what’s in it for them?

- **DON’T REPEAT YOURSELF**

If they’ve already heard you, expect action or else you are teaching them that they can wait for the second or third nagging before they have to respond. Consistently move to make it happen the first time.

- **TRAIN THEM TO REPLY**

It’s basic politeness and good teamwork, even if it’s just, “OK, Dad”.

- **WATCH YOUR TONE**

The way you say things can carry subtle messages: “You’re not going to listen, are you?”; “You’re a bit dumb”; “You make me angry”; “I’m confident that you can do this”; “You’re a good kid—you just need to know what to do.”

- **BE COURTEOUS**

Too many parents speak to their children as they would never speak to anyone else and call it “discipline.” It’s pretty stupid and comical when a parent screams, “I’ll teach you to talk to me like that!” I think, “Yes, it seems you’ve already taught them.”

- **EXPECT COURTESY IN RETURN**

Politely assert until you get it.

- **TALK THEM UP**

I well remember one teacher who had the amazing knack of making a telling-off sound like a compliment. He’d say, “That’s not the sort of behaviour I’d expect from someone as intelligent as you.” Or “I’m sure you’re capable of much better than this. Are you having a problem right now? Is there some way I can help you to try harder?” That brought major change in some of us and we still liked him afterwards. That strategy is much wiser than saying, “You’re such an idiot” or “You’re just like your Uncle Fred and he’s in prison.”

- **NO PUT-DOWNS**

Even joking ones, especially in a stressful situation.

- **HUMOUR IS FANTASTIC**

Laugh at yourself and take the stress out of tense situations with a good chuckle, but be very careful laughing at your child unless they really need to lighten up.

- **BE A GOOD LISTENER YOURSELF**

They will learn only by watching you, not just by what you say. The best listeners:

- face the speaker (when they can—don’t try it while driving)
- turn their bodies toward you
- don’t try to think about something else at the same time

(You might want to read our Relationships course “Communication: How misunderstandings happen”).

Listen for feelings!

- **GET INTO THEIR WORLD**

Start when they are tiny. “Is Teddy’s sore knee better now, Doctor?” (Don’t always play the Big Bad Wolf or you’ll become typecast in bad-guy roles and they’ll spend good money on therapy.) When they’re teenagers, be interested in them. Who is their favourite band? What do they sing? Who are their best friends? Their favourite teachers? How do they feel about themselves? What do they struggle with?

- **INVITE THEM INTO YOUR WORLD TOO**

Show them what you do at work. Let them meet your friends. Answer their questions about when you were young—it will remind them that you weren’t born ancient. As well, it reminds you of what was important to you when you were their age.

- **EXPRESS YOUR FEELINGS IN APPROPRIATE WAYS**

Train them that it’s OK to discuss feelings. This is especially hard for males in our culture, so give them special help.

- **DON’T INTERROGATE**

When you are shining the desk lamp in their eyes and saying, “Ve haff vays of makink you talk,” you are not building happy relationships. Neither does hard cross-examination. Of course, there are times when you need to play detective—for example, about drugs. Even then, subtle is better than heavy most times.

- **HAVE A FEW SECRET SIGNALS**

Work out a coded way to say things like, “This person is hassling me but I don’t want to come out and say it. Help!” or “Get me out of this situation with my dignity intact.” (Just don’t use these to play poker.)

.....

“TRAIN YOUR CHILDREN
THAT IT’S OK TO
DISCUSS FEELINGS.”

.....



- **HAVE REGULAR TIME FOR A RELAXED TALK**

For example, bedtime. One man said he grew up in a family of five but his mother managed to find time for him alone every night before bedtime. She kept it up right into his teens and it helped him through some rough patches. It also helped make him a good communicator and his wife is very grateful. He now practises the bedtime chat with his children. If he is away on business, he phones up, allowing for time zones, to chat before bedtime.

- **READ THEIR BODY LANGUAGE**

Respond to it.

- **LISTEN FOR FEELINGS.**

Children may not always say what they really mean (or feel). Or they may reveal emotions when you least expect it. Watch out for them.

- **KEEP CONFIDENCES**

The only possible exceptions are sexual abuse, which you have a duty to encourage them to report, and drugs and other serious illegality. You need to tell your children that you would act on these confidences. But even if you feel you are conscience-bound to break a confidence, do so with the minimum embarrassment to your child. Don't blow their trust.

- **TREAT QUESTIONS SERIOUSLY**

They need to learn to trust you and that you take them seriously.

- **WRITE NOTES FOR THE LUNCH BOXES.**

It's the little things that mean the most.

- **BE A LETTER WRITER**

One father always sits down between Christmas and New Year and writes each member of his family "The Official New Year Letter". He reminisces about their year, congratulating and encouraging, and finishes by telling them what he most appreciates about them. His children say that in down moments, they often pull out their dad's letter and remind themselves that they must be good people because they have it in writing. One day those letters will be priceless memories.

What can you do about lying?

Have you ever told a whopper? (Oh go on, tell the truth now!)

Why did you do it?

Probably for a reason similar to one on the following list of reasons why children lie:

To avoid punishment or loss.

To avoid losing people's respect and affection.

Wanting to impress and not thinking the real you was good enough (due to low self-esteem).

Copying family members. (Ouch!)

LYING BEHAVIOUR VARIES WITH AGE:

Children under three rarely lie because they believe parents can read their minds. If they tell tall stories, it's probably because they honestly believe them. Some of them still believe in Santa Claus.

At about three or four they may start experimenting with imaginative stories. "Spud did it, not me." A good way to ask for the truth is to keep it light and fun, "Are you only joking?"

School-age children may lie because they hate to make you mad and lose your approval. They know they're fibbing, but may reason that it's kind.

Teenagers may lie because they want privacy and independence, or freedom to do what they want.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT LYING?

Set a good example yourself. Dodgy children often mean dodgy parents.

Never ask them to lie for you. If they answer the door and you hear who it is and don't want to talk, be careful. If you whisper, "Say I'm not home", you're giving them a lesson in lying.

Catch them telling the truth and praise them to the skies. If you do this a number of times, telling them they are honest children, they may well live up to it.

Teach them the difference between fiction and truth. Start early with story books and TV. "Is that a real story?"

Avoid direct questions if possible. Don't say, "Did you hit your sister?" Say, "Why did you hit your sister?" (This is an old police tactic.)

Don't ever call them a liar. They might believe you.

If they lie, stop them and say, "What I'd like you to do is tell me the truth."

In punishment situations, reward them for telling the truth by lightening their sentence. "For hitting your brother like that, you'd usually get a week with no TV. But you told me the truth under pressure and that was very good, so I'll reduce your punishment to three days."

Don't ask teenagers too many questions. Of course you should ask some questions—you have the right because of your responsibility to protect them. But leave them some privacy.

Seek counselling if the problem persists.

Teach them to fight fair

Relax, this is not about karate. Verbal fights are not ideal and can be damaging, but they are a part of communication because they allow face-to-face moments of honesty that clear up built-up resentment or misunderstanding. When your children fight each other, you can use that situation as a teaching opportunity.



WHY DO CHILDREN FIGHT?

They might be fighting for attention, love and “their place in the sun”. Make sure you give them all enough time. For example, older children need special attention when a new baby arrives. Dad might take them out to buy a new outfit or toy for themselves and one that will be their gift for the new baby. When they give the gift to the new baby, tell them what a good big brother/sister they are.

Often an older child will pick on a younger one who they feel is favoured. When parents defend the younger child all the time, the older child will feel even more alone. If this is happening, a positive solution would be simply giving more time and attention to the older child.

They may be fighting boundary wars as countries still do. The best way to sort that out is by working out clearly where the borders are. Allow children boundaries such as the right to say, “No” and “That’s mine” and “I don’t want to” and the right not to be touched, poked, tickled or even their “air space” invaded if they don’t want. If they can’t work out the boundaries, you might need to. Boundaries are lines we draw to decide who we are, what we will and won’t do. They define our limits, our independence, our responsibility, ourselves.

“YOU DON’T HAVE
TO BE 100% EQUAL,
JUST FAIR.”



HOW CAN YOU PREVENT FIGHTS?

Crack down on name-calling.

Teach them to share. One strategy is to let the person who goes second on the swings have a longer ride.

If you have three children, make sure one is not always the odd one out.

Don't compare them. If you say, "Why can't you? Your brother did at your age!", the child will feel discouraged and less likely to try—and will hate the brother in the bargain.

If you step in, make sure you are not upset. Wait till you are calm.

If you are playing judge, make sure you listen to both sides fairly. You don't want to teach them that life is unjust and bad behaviour may be ignored or even rewarded.

Rather than always playing judge, ask them how they would sort out the problem. Brainstorm together and agree on a win-win solution.

Don't treat them all the same. You don't have to be 100 per cent equal, just fair.

Be careful with the labelling that goes on unless it's positive. "Tammy is our star gymnast and Danny is our swimming torpedo" is fine, but "Andy has a bad temper" is not.

Teach children to sit down and have an all-out-in-the-open session. Model keeping cool, asking questions, checking you understand, validating feelings ("I can see you're upset about this"), even if you don't think they are making sense.



Authors: Carla and Grenville Kent

Published by: HopeChannel

Printed by: Signs Publishing Company,
Warburton, Victoria, Australia.