

Building Healthy Parent-Child Communication

Healthy communication — the kind that builds a strong two-way bridge — is crucial in helping your child develop a healthy personality and good relationships with you and others. It gives your child a chance to become a happy, safe, healthy person, no matter what happens. Healthy communication within a family takes a little effort on the part of everyone. Consider the suggestions below as “building blocks” to a strong, solid two-way communication bridge.

- Being available — Children need to feel that their parents are available to them. This means being able to spend time with your child. Even spending 10 minutes a day communicating with each of your children alone makes the bridge of communication stronger. Being available also means quickly getting yourself into a quiet and “tuned-in” mood before you start listening to your child or talking about something important. Being able to understand and talk about your feelings as well as your child’s is another important part of being available.
- Being a good listener — Being a good listener helps your child feel loved, even when he is upset and you can’t do anything to fix the problem. Ask your child for his ideas and feelings before beginning to talk about yours. Also, try to understand exactly what he is saying to you. What your child is trying to tell you is important to him, even when it may not be to you. You do not have to agree with what your child is saying to be a good listener. It helps your child calm down, so later he can listen to you.
- Showing empathy — This means tuning in to your child and letting her know you appreciate her feelings. You can show empathy even if you disagree with your child. Empathy is about appreciating feelings for their own sake. It is not about who is right or wrong. Showing empathy means checking out whether you understand what your child is feeling. Ask whether your understanding of how she is feeling is right.
- Being a good sender — Be a good listener first. If your child already feels heard and cared for, he will be in a better mood to listen to you. Make sure that what you say, your tone of voice, and what you do all send the same message. For example, if you laugh when you say “NO!”, your child will be confused and will not know what you really want. Use words to communicate what you want your child to do. Even when setting limits with a toddler you can use words while holding him back.

Use feeling words when you praise your child’s behavior. For example, you can say “I am so happy!” when your child puts away her toys. It is also helpful to use “you” and point out the good behavior (as in “You have done a great job with your homework!”). Encourage your child to praise herself as well. Praise helps children get through the bad times.

Use “I” statements to tell your child what displeases you about her behavior. For example, saying “When I couldn’t find you, I felt worried and angry” is better than saying in an angry tone “You disappeared! Where were you?”

- Being a good role model — Young children learn better by copying what their parents do than by being told. Children will copy your way of communicating. If you yourself use a lot of feeling words, it will help your child to learn to do the same.

When parents use feeling words instead of screaming, doing something hurtful, or calling someone a name, children learn that using feeling words is a better way to deal with strong feelings. Saying feelings rather than acting on them helps children control themselves. You can help your child learn to label his feelings by deciding what feeling words are okay to say at home or in school.

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