You Cannot Not Communicate

Communication is something everyone engages in, but some with more skill than others. In much of our communication, the focus is on the content of conversations. We listen to what people are saying to us and attempt to respond to their words. More often we listen only slightly to what the other person is saying while we are thinking of a response. There is a risk that conversations may become a series of two monologues. How can we help our children avoid the pitfalls of miscommunication?

Communication is more varied and complex than we may realise. It is a two-way street involving both receiving messages and giving messages; it involves both spoken words and nonverbal messages, such as facial expression and tone of voice.

The communication process takes four steps to be complete:

1. **A message is sent**: Someone shares an idea or feeling with another person.
2. **A message is received**: The other person gives feedback, through words or signs, to indicate that a message has been received.
3. **The sender receives feedback**: The response of the receiver tells the sender if the message was understood.
4. **Another message is sent**: If the first message was not understood, the sender tries other ways to express the same idea or feeling. If the first message was understood, another message can be sent, and communication can proceed.

Very often misunderstanding between friends and family can be traced back to a problem with communication – the messages get lost or stuck somewhere in this 4-step process. For effective communication, a message must be given and received with a common understanding of what it means. The ‘sender’ is responsible for being sure his message is accurately received, for finding a way to express himself so that the receiver knows what the message means.

Good communication skills will help children develop self-confidence, a good sense of self-worth, and better relationships with family and others. Good communication skills consist of: sending a clear message; giving full attention to the person sending the message; paying attention to all the ways the message is being sent.

No one is born a good communicator; they have to be taught the skills.

A vital communication skill is listening. Teach your children to express themselves by listening to them. Listen carefully and pay attention to all the ways they are sending a message to you. Remove distractions when you are talking to them, for instance, turn off the television, ask them to look at you, or have them come in the same room with you while you talk to them.
We should also be sure that we have understood accurately. You can help improve this accuracy by checking what a child thinks they heard. Ask them to repeat back to you, in their own words, what they heard from you. If they get it wrong, try again. If they get it right, praise them for this, such as by saying, “Good listening!”

Most people would think that the verbal (words) carry a bigger portion of the meaning of communication than the non-verbal. This is wrong! Research shows that up to 93% of the meaning of a message can be carried by the non-verbal communication, and only 7% by the verbal. Help your child to pay attention to the many ways people express themselves by drawing their attention to facial expressions (“What does my face tell you?”) or asking them to empathise with someone else (“How do you think your sister is feeling right now?”)

Children learn the most about how to communicate by communicating with us and watching how we communicate with others. We need to be good role models and take the time to listen and clearly send our own messages.

Active listening is a way of listening to your child that lets him know you are working to understand his thoughts and feelings.

- **Make sure your body language says you are interested and listening.** Make eye contact with your child, turn your body toward her, and nod as she is talking to let her know you are listening.
- **Reduce any distractions that will keep you from focusing on her message.** Or postpone listening until you can focus on the child, example by saying, “I will be better able to listen to you once I am done with ____.”
- **Listen for the content and the feelings behind your child’s words.** Is he expressing joy, sadness, excitement or anger; remember to pay attention to both his words and body language!
- **Check-out how accurately you understood what your child said:**
  “What I am hearing from you is……”
  “It sounds like ..... was very upsetting for you”

Focus on listening, rather than responding. Postpone offering advice to your child until all his thoughts have been expressed.

In the next article, we will examine how we can send clear messages.

Articles cited: *Developing Your Child’s Communication Skills*, University of Delaware’s Cooperative Extension Program