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SP489-B-Communication: A Strong Bridge

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE

SP489-B

PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Communication:
Building A Strong Bridge Between You And Your Children

Sometimes we think that communication is the same thing as telling someone something. But communication is much more than that. Communication is any sharing of meaning between two (or more) people.

We very often communicate without words, such as when I look threateningly at a child who is about to take a cookie. I may say no words, but the child gets a message.

One of the challenges of communication is that we may not have the same meanings as the people we communicate with. Even with our children, we may have very different meanings.

For example, if your son comes home from school and says he has had trouble with his teacher, you might ask, “What did you do to make the teacher mad?” When we ask that question, we are looking for more information so we can help the child be better behaved.

What do you think is the meaning for the child when we ask, “What did you do to make the teacher mad?” It’s possible that the child feels accused, feels that you care more about the teacher than about him, that no one understands him, or that you don’t care about his feelings.

So what can you do to communicate better?

Take time to discover children's meanings.

A very important way to build a relationship with children is to ask questions about their interests, activities, and feelings. The questions should not sound like a policeman trying to get information from them. They should sound like a friend showing interest in them. For example:

"How did your project at school go?"

"What did you enjoy about your visit at your friend's house?"

"Will you tell me about your best experience today?"

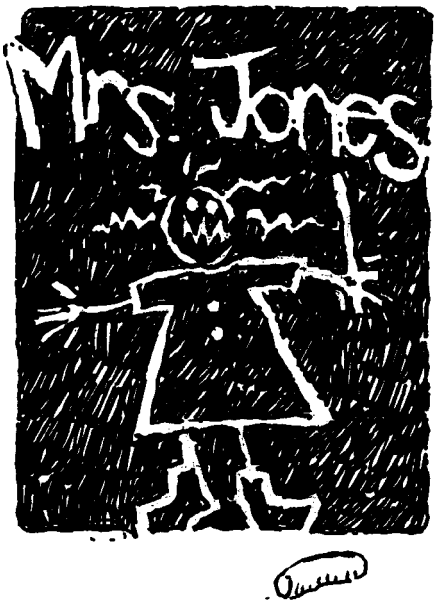
"You seem worried (happy, tired, angry). Will you tell me how you feel?"

One of the most important times to understand children's feelings is when they have strong feelings. If your child has just told you about trouble with his teacher, you might say one of the following:

"How did you feel about what your teacher did?"

"That sounds like it was very embarrassing."

"I wonder if you felt angry."



The first step in effective communication is taking time to understand. Some parents worry that showing understanding to children means that the parent agrees with their behavior. The fact that you understand how your children feel does not necessarily mean that you agree with their behavior. It means that you care about their feelings! That is a very important message. Of course, after you have understood, it's good to find a solution to the problem. You don't need to decide whether the child or the teacher was to blame. Teaching children how to behave is what matters. You can simply ask, "What do you need to do to prevent trouble with your teacher in the future?" If the child has felt safe and understood, then he should be willing to think of ways to prevent future trouble. As a parent you can help the child think of possibilities: "Would it help to sit by different friends?" "Do you need to tell your friends that you want to finish your work before you talk?"

In order to be effective at this part of communication, you should concentrate on what the child says, try to notice how the child feels, and ask questions that help you understand better. (For more information on how to show understanding, see SP488-B in this series, "Being Understanding: A Key To Developing Healthy Children.")

In order to understand children's meanings, it is often helpful to stop what you're doing, sit at their level, and, if you're listening to a small child, put her in your lap. Even if the child is older, you might put a hand on her shoulder or arm, look into her face, and concentrate on what she says. Of course, if the child is uncomfortable being held, don't try to force contact.

As you listen to the child, you may be tempted to argue or correct. What is the message you send to the child if you argue with him or correct him? Is that the message you want to send? Wouldn't it be more helpful to listen, understand, and help him make decisions?

Send clear and encouraging messages.

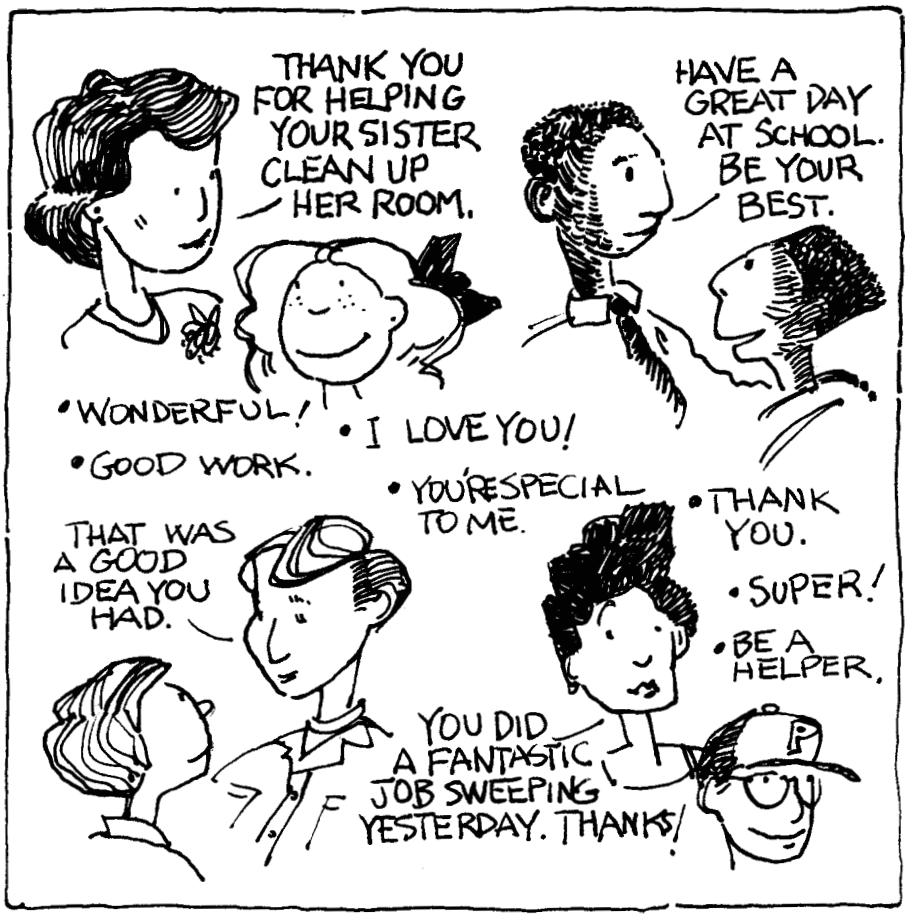
The next step in being an effective communicator is to send clear messages. Does our talk with our children ever sound like the following?

Why aren't you up? Are you going to sleep all day? Who said you could use that? Clean the dishes off the table. Hurry up and get dressed. Why did you put that on? Turn down the radio. Have you made the bed yet? That skirt is too short. Your room is a mess. Stand up straight. Can't you get anything right? Clean your plate. Quit chewing your gum like that. I don't care if everyone else does have one. Have you done your homework? Don't slouch. You didn't make the bed. Look it up in the dictionary. Get off the phone. Why do you do that? Turn the music down. Take the dog out. Turn that radio off and go to sleep.

We may think that such messages teach children to be responsible. But when most of the messages a child receives are like those, the child may feel dumb and unloved. The child gets instructions. But the other message that comes with nagging, reminding, criticizing, threatening, lecturing, questioning, advising, evaluating, telling, and demanding is that the child is dumb or bad. The child can get very discouraged.

But parents can learn to send clear and encouraging messages to their children. Consider the following:

Good morning. Thank you for hanging up your pajamas. Thank you for cleaning your plate. I'm glad you got yourself dressed. Will you help me?



Sometimes it's hard to be encouraging with our children because we're so worn out, tired, unhappy, or angry. It's easy to feel overwhelmed with all that a parent is expected to do. If you feel overwhelmed very often, you may want to read SP487-B in this series, "Taking Care Of The Parent: Replacing Stress With Peace."

Sometimes we try to express feelings to our children when we feel angry. Usually that is a bad idea. If you feel like hurting or insulting the child, wait until you have had time to calm down before you try to discuss your feelings. After you have had time to settle down, you may be able to share your feelings without insulting the child.

Taking time to encourage children pays off. And it's easier to deal with a child who feels understood, valued, and encouraged.

There's another kind of clear message that is important to send: the relationship message. A relationship message is any message that tells a person he's important to you. For example:

"I really enjoy being with you."

"Thank you for being a helper."

"You're a big help. I appreciate it."

"Will you come with me to the store? I like to have you with me."

By regularly sending positive relationship messages, we can make it clear to our children that we value them, respect them, and love to be with them.

Share your feelings in helpful ways.

When it's necessary to share some hurt or frustration with your child, there are effective ways to do it. One way is to use "I" messages. "I" messages are different from "you" messages in which a person blames: "You make me so mad." "You're so inconsiderate." "You" messages hurt people.

In an "I" message, a person shares her feelings without blaming. An "I" message usually takes the form: "When (describe what happens that is a problem), I feel (describe the feeling)." For example:

"When I see mud on the floor I feel discouraged or angry."

"When you hit your brother, I feel sad and angry."

"When you leave your backpack on the floor, I feel frustrated."

"When you ask me questions while I'm on the phone, I feel trapped."

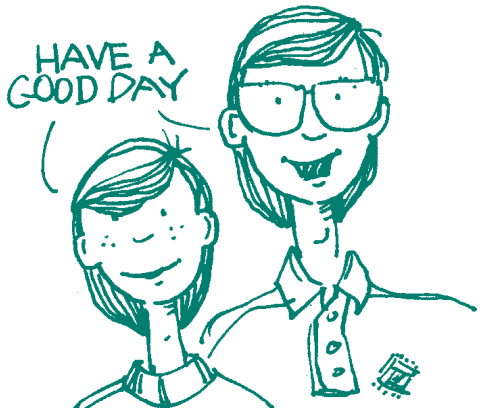
The key to a successful "I" message is that it informs the child of your feelings without insulting or blaming. A good "I" message also lets the child know what he is doing that is causing trouble.

Sometimes when we've had a bad day and are feeling very tired, it's good to let our children know how we feel so they won't think they're causing our crankiness. We might say, "I'm very tired today. I'm sorry I may be cross. Let's be extra careful today so we won't irritate each other."

Keep the relationship positive.

Most of the messages we share with our children should be positive ones. It's good to tell them about our joys and accomplishments. It's good to tell them when they please us. It's good to share with them what we are learning. It's especially good when we tell them about the joy they bring to us. And it's great when we encourage them to tell us about their joys and accomplishments.

The purpose of communication with our children is to share love and caring while teaching them about suitable behavior. If we think about the messages we send, we can become more skillful communicators. It takes time and effort to become good at communicating. But it's worth the effort.



If you want to learn more . . .

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