

Best communication starts with your ears

Sometimes people compare good communication to a beautiful dance. Both partners can almost predict their partner's next steps, even without looking into their eyes. But sometimes the steps aren't so smooth. You may be ready for a nice smooth waltz while your child is "bouncing to a heavy metal beat." Sometimes communication falls apart.

Don't feel like you are alone. All families have communication problems. Children and parents have their own personalities. They think, talk, and express themselves differently. It takes work to communicate so everyone understands.

Good communication starts with the ears, rather than the mouth. Being a good listener may sound simple, but "active listening" can be hard. Think about this example from the publication, "Communicating Within Your Family" by the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension Service.

You are busy getting supper ready. Suddenly your 12-year-old daughter storms into the house. As she slams the door, she screams, "I hate school!" Then she stomps into the living room and turns the TV on full blast.

At first you might feel angry as you observe her actions. But, listening is more important than talking. Listening will help you find out what is really the problem.

When your daughter is ready to talk, turn off the TV, sit across from your child and look into her eyes. Give her your full attention.

Lori McMechan

PARENTING POINTS

Lori McMechan is a parenting group facilitator at the Elspeth Reid Family Resource Centre, a facility of Child and Family Services of Western Manitoba.
» 255 Ninth St., Brandon
» 726-6280

• Try to identify the facts:

You may find out your daughter didn't know about a quiz. So, she didn't read the chapter.

Now find out how she is feeling:

She may be frustrated because she had the assignment wrong. She may feel angry or disappointed at her own failure. She may be embarrassed and nervous about how you'll react to her grade or her irresponsibility.

As you continue to talk to your daughter, keep the following tips in mind.

Try not to interrupt. If you are confused, ask your child to explain it again. "I'm not sure I understand. Can you explain again why you weren't ready for the quiz?"

Don't try to think of a solution or a "comeback." Just listen.

Don't be judgmental. You may feel angry or disappointed. Save your own judgment. It can stop communication.

Watch your child's eyes and body. These will give clues to what she is feeling. Does she have slumped shoulders? Is she looking nervously away?

Use eye contact. Nod from

time to time to show your child you are listening.

Now it is your turn.

Start by stating the facts. To make sure you understand, state the facts, as you understand them, then put your child's feelings into words.

For example, "For some reason, you didn't know about the assignment. So you weren't ready for the quiz" (facts) "It sounds like you were confused. Maybe you're worried about what I'll do about your poor grade" (feelings).

Address the problem, not your child. Try to understand how the problem developed. Can your child work this out for herself? Or, is it a problem for parents? Should you talk to her teacher?

Try to guide your child with your words. Encourage her to talk to her teacher to find out if she can make up the grade? Or ask for questions to help her develop a plan. "Do you think you could have forgotten the assignment? How could you keep that from happening again?" You may offer a plan. "Would it help to get a notebook to write down your assignments?"

Use I messages. Talk about how the problem affects you. "I feel concerned when you are having trouble at school. I want you to do well."

Sometimes it seems easier to make decisions for children than to listen to their ideas. But it's important to listen to children and to solve problems together. By listening, we show children their ideas and abilities are important.