



Improving Children's Behavior Through Parent/Child Communication

Reflections

Definition: "A communication tool that demonstrates to another person that we understand how they feel. This tool shows that we care enough about what our children have to say."


Casting a "reflection" in your child: think of your child's inner self (i.e., how they view themselves) as being a small mirror. This mirror "reflects" the words cast at them, be they positive or negative, and fashions the child's self-image. How you talk to your child will determine the picture they have of themselves. Positive talk will create positive reflections and negative talk will create negative reflections.

Listen before you talk: listen with your full attention, not your half-attention. In other words, turn off the television or wait to the commercial to give your child your attention. If you have to ask your child to wait until you finish cooking or cleaning, do so, but do give it to them. REMEMBER: your body language tells volumes! Facing your child and looking at him/her in the eyes shows your interest and attention just as much, if not more, than your words.

Just the facts": to start, reflect your child's comments by repeating the facts. Now you know why it's important to give full attention. When your child comes home from school or wants to talk about the latest craze, listen with full attention. Don't interrupt or make a comment. Most conversation by your child don't require a comment from the parent regardless of whether they ask you for one or not. During your child's speech, you can respond with an acknowledging or understanding work, such as "oh" or "hmmm".

Looking for the joys and the hurts: as you get more accomplished at reflecting the facts, you can move on to the next level of "reflections" which is to reflect your child's feelings. This takes more practice and effort. Most of us are not accomplished at knowing our own feelings or grew up in a home that did not accept certain feelings, such as anger or sadness. Begin by labeling your child's feelings for him or her. For example, tell your child, "You sound angry," "sad," or "happy." Resist the temptation to give advice or interrogate them. It is okay to let your child struggle with their feelings in order for them to identify and accept them. You can help them by labeling their feelings for them until they are able to label them themselves. Don't worry about getting it wrong. Your child will let you know by clarifying their feelings to you. After all, this is our goal, to help them recognize their own feelings.

Cautions: paraphrase or summarize your child's facts and feelings. Don't "parrot" them. This turns children off, especially older children. Practice listening for about a month. Give yourself time to develop and use this communication tool. Think how long you've used the destructive, hand-me-down tolls of interrogation and advice-giving. New habits take time and practice.



Silences

Definition: "A communication tool that controls the start and stop of conversation. A long pause between words that allows the listener to demonstrate their respect and attention by waiting before talking in turn."

Most parents err on the side of talking too much. Many parents have stated that if they didn't consistently question their children, they would never tell them anything. It sounds crazy, but try not talking as a way to get your child to talk to you. Follow these essential "thou shalt nots" in order to learn how to use silence as a communication tool with your child.

Thou shalt not be a chronic crowder. Chronic crowders cut off their children in mid-sentence and rarely let them finish what they're trying to say. This is why many children stop talking to their parents. If this seems to be a problem try decreasing your "crowding" in small increments. Start off with holding your tongue or biting your lip for 1 second before talking, then 2 seconds, then 3, and so on.

Thou shalt not be an interrogating interrupter. Interrupters find the slightest pause in a conversation to get their own questions and words in edgewise. Thou shalt not be a response ripoff artist. Response ripoff artists let their children finish what they want to say only to rip into them "with a few words of their own." Thou shalt not be an overtalk overlord. Overtalk overlords talk at the same time as their child and rarely relinquish attention just listening.

Our ability to handle silences may be related to our self-worth, parental belief systems and/or our cultural background. It may be difficult to handle silences in your home. Some families may consider long silences to be rude or controlling. Be sensitive to these conditions before "shutting up".


Learning to handle silences: practice taking turns. This demonstrates respect and teaches children how you would want them to behave when you or other adults are talking.

Practice talking softly. It's difficult to talk over somebody when talking softly. Another benefit of talking softly is that children will strain to hear you! This can gain their attention as well.

Practice slowing down your talk. Slowing down allows your conversation with your child to develop a natural rhythm. Most people talk faster to get more words in to the conversation.

Disclosures

Definition: "A communication tool that reveals our similar feelings of past experiences that relate to the feelings or experiences of our children. This communication tool creates intimacy, trust, and a sense of safety for our children to open up to us."



Disclosures are one of nature's little known laws of communication. In order to get your children (or most anyone else) to open up to you, you must first open up to them. Walking the fine line of vulnerability can be risky. In order to keep your balance, here are a few disclosure techniques to get you to the other side of the closer relationships.

Me-too's are a way of letting your child know that you, too, have felt the same way they are feeling or you, too, have gone through a similar experience. Parents simply state, "You know, I have felt that way myself" or "I know what it is like to go through that too!" Next, tell them very specifically when and how you felt the same way or experience a similar situation. This builds a sense of understanding between parent and child. It also teaches your child how they can handle the situation and cope with their feelings.

Hypothetical disclosures are what you might feel or react to if someone else's situations had happened to you instead of them. You might state, "If my friend hit me, I would feel angry" or "If I was trying to make new friends, I might start my just saying 'Hi' or asking them their names." This gives your child courage to act a certain way and demonstrates your understanding for their situation.

Symmetry takes your repertoire of interests, skills, and likes and matches them up with your child's. This brings the parent and child closer together by having something in common. If you don't seem to have anything in common, this is your common bond. Not having anything in common allows the 2 of you to look together for something you both can share an interest in. Just the act of looking is symmetry.

Here-N-Nows focus on a child's present situation while bringing in experiences from his/her past. We all use our past experiences to make decisions about how to act in our present context. For example, you might say, "Feeling sad about Grandma's moving out of state is a lot like the time you lost your favorite doll.

After looking for a while, you finally found it again. Grandma will come back and you will get to see her again, too."

Caution: feel free to mix these disclosures together until you get just the right blend. You can use them with the other communication tools as well.

Don't disclose your inappropriate behavior or reactions. Although we think we can teach our children right from wrong by telling them what we did wrong, it is more effective to give positive examples from our past. This doesn't mean you can't talk about the "negative" feelings, such as anger or grief. These are not really negative feelings. They don't feel great, but they serve a very good purpose in our lives.

Don't bring up your child's past mistakes. This is not a form of disclosure. This is an example of unforgiven hurts and resentments. Hurts beget hurts. Revenge is not a basis for supportive relationships.

Remember that disclosures provide a safety net to our children. They tell our children that it is okay to open up to us because we are willing to open up to them.

