

CHAPTER 23

Communication Skills

Communicating well is important for problem solving and is one of the most valuable skills in life. Communication can be defined as the giving or exchanging of information. However, the essence of communication can be described best as mutual understanding. At the root of most personal problems is a failure to thoroughly understand one another. Disagreements are magnified and complicated by our inability to see the world not only through one another's eyes but also through each other's minds and hearts. We misunderstand one another and then mistrust motives and different points of view. With good communication skills we can be more confident of clearly understanding another person's needs and being accurately understood in return. Good communication means sharing not only words, ideas and information but also feelings, emotions and sentiments.

How well do we solve problems and conflicts? Do we make an effort to prevent problems and conflicts from happening in the first place?

Growing up is often accompanied by frequent clashes between parents and children, especially teenagers. Many adolescents feel their parents are controlling, overbearing, old-fashioned and "too strict."

"My life is run by my parents. They tell me when to get up, when to go to bed, when to do my homework and what to eat. They're so strict that I'm not even allowed to do the things my friends can do. They act like I'm 5 years old."

Lena, age 15

Some feel their parents pressure them too much.

"My older brother was like a perfect person. He got straight A's and was captain of the basketball team. My parents always tell me, "Why can't you be more like your brother?"

Max, age 14

Others feel their parents don't really care about them.

"My dad never shows me any affection."

Nina, age 15



It's natural that parents want to protect their children from harm until they are old enough to make healthy, safe and wise decisions on their own. Adolescents are usually in a hurry to grow up and strive for more independence. Often they like doing things that their parents feel they're not ready for. This can create a tug of war between adolescents and their parents.

If our parents' expectations are making us unhappy, as in Max's case, it's easy to feel resentful. We might even think that there is something wrong with us. If, like Nina, our parents don't show us affection, we might feel that they don't really love us. Often parents don't realize that we may feel upset. Parents love their children very much, but sometimes have a hard time showing affection. They also may forget to take time out of their busy lives, even though they really love us. It is important to communicate our feelings to our parents in order for any change to occur.

Let us look at some communication skills that can help in communicating effectively. These may be especially useful in communicating your feelings to your parents.



Sending the message

Communication consists of sending a message or talking, and receiving a message or listening. When talking to others about a problem, there are two ways to approach them. Either you can let them know what they are doing wrong or you can tell them what you feel about the given situation. Telling people what they are doing wrong tends to make people feel angry, hurt or defensive. When this happens, communication is blocked and arguments can easily start. Very often the person will feel blamed and accused and feel that his personality, rather than the issue, is being attacked.

When people feel like they're under attack, they usually defend themselves by either denying or fighting back. If you tell someone, "It's your fault!" or "You can't be trusted!" the

other person usually will argue back by denying the accusations. He or she might even return the attack by saying thing like: "It's not my fault, it's your fault!" or "It's you who can't be trusted!"

Here is an example of this type of communication between a parent and teenage daughter.

Parent: Where have you been, young lady! It's past midnight and you're two hours late. You simply cannot be trusted!

Daughter: Oh fine, the minute I walk in, you yell at me without even letting me explain!

Parent: I've had enough of your excuses. You never care about anyone but yourself!

Daughter: You're the one who doesn't care. I could have been dead or something, and all you do is yell at me. You never let me tell my side of the story!

Parent: Don't you talk to me like that! That's it! No going out with your friends for the rest of the month! (*Communication has completely broken down.*)

Rather than accusing the other person, the better strategy would be to try to express how you feel about a situation or an issue. Perhaps you'd like your parents to understand what you are saying. Maybe you'd even like to change the situation or behavior that's causing the problems. Conveying how you see a given issue lets the other person know how you feel, without attacking him or her in a personal way. This type of communication can help prevent fights because you are talking about just one situation, not what "always" or "never" happens. Perhaps if the parent in this example had expressed concern instead of accusing, things might have gone differently.

Parent: I've been so worried! It's after 10 o'clock. I didn't know where you were!

Daughter: Gosh, I'm sorry you were so worried. The bus broke down, and I had to walk to the next stop and wait for another one. I tried to call, but the only phone nearby was broken. I'm really sorry.

Parent: Well, at least you tried to call. The important thing is that you're home safely.

This time the parent expressed worry and concern to the daughter. Since the daughter didn't feel blamed or attacked, she had nothing to deny and no reason to attack back. She had a chance to explain, and a verbal conflict was prevented. If the parent had accused the daughter, could the daughter still have prevented the conflict?

Parent: Where have you been, young lady! It's past midnight and you're two hours late! You simply cannot be trusted!

Daughter: Can I have a chance to explain what happened?

Parent: No! I've had enough of your excuses. You never care about anyone but yourself!

Daughter: When I have a good explanation but can't say anything that I am feeling or thinking, I feel very frustrated. (*Daughter stays calm.*)

Parent: Oh, all right, tell me what happened.

Daughter: The bus broke down, and I had to walk to the next stop to wait for another one. I knew you'd be worried and I tried to call, but the only phone nearby was broken. I'm really sorry.

Parent: Well, I guess you did all you could. I'm sorry I yelled at you, but I was so worried.

Daughter: I am sorry.

Parent: Me too.

By calmly explaining the situation instead of being defensive, the daughter kept the lines of communication open and avoided a fight. Of course, there is no guarantee that things will always go this smoothly. However, we have a better chance of being understood when we state things calmly and clearly.

How to send "I-messages"

There are three steps to communicating clearly. Although we don't always have to use these three steps and they don't have to be done in this exact order, it does help to follow them.

- Step 1:** First, we describe the situation or behavior that is causing problems. Be specific and talk about only one situation or behavior at a time. Avoid name calling, blaming and accusing, and try to avoid using the word “you.” For example: “When I’m not allowed to go camping with my friends” sounds much better than “When you don’t let me go camping with my friends.”
- Step 2:** Next we describe how we feel when this situation or behavior happens. “When I’m not allowed to go camping with my friends, I feel really upset.” This sounds better than “You make me so upset when you don’t let me go camping with my friends.”
- Step 3:** Finally, we explain why we feel this way. “When I’m not allowed to go camping with my friends, I feel really upset because sometimes I want to spend more time with them. They tease me about not being allowed to spend the night away from home.”

Of course, there is no guarantee that things will always work out smoothly. But young people tend to do better with communicating this way rather than saying things like: “You always treat me like a baby!”

Timing is also important. If we approach our parents about wanting money to buy something, but it’s just before payday, we may not do very well. We need to open conversations at a time when our parents are likely to be receptive. Of course, some things just can’t wait. But if there is an option, think about timing.

What do we communicate through our body language? Tensing up, turning away, slouching, rolling our eyes, pointing a finger or shaking a fist are all examples of body language. It’s important to be aware of how our body language may affect our messages. What was our tone of voice like? If we express our feelings in an accusing tone of voice, our message may not be well received. It’s best to speak in a calm tone of voice. This usually will have a soothing effect on the other person and help us to think clearly as well.

What if we express ourselves to our parents and they come back with an accusation? When this happens, it’s very easy to respond angrily. Soon we’re back in a fight cycle, tossing accusations back and forth. No matter how angry we may feel, we need to remain calm. Listening skills will help more with this problem.

Receiving the message

Sometimes young people ignore their parents or express their defiance in different ways. Most of us are experts on how not to listen. How-

ever, this kind of behavior actually tells the other person that we consider what he has to say not worthy of our listening. In paying attention, we let the speaker know that he has a right to whatever feeling or opinion he is expressing. This doesn’t mean we have to pretend to agree. We may not feel that our parents’ viewpoint is accurate. Yet, just as we believe that we have the right to our own feelings and opinions, we should respect the fact that they have a right to theirs. If we can communicate understanding and a respectful attitude to our parents, our relationship with them will go much more smoothly.

So how we should listen?



Step 1 is called passive listening. This means, for example, keeping quiet, not interrupting, standing still and looking at our parents when they speak to us. With passive listening we simply pay attention.

Step 2 is called active listening. Nodding or shaking our heads and making simple responses like “uh-huh” or “really” are examples of active listening. This encourages our parents and let them know we are listening. Using simple phrases like “that’s interesting” or “I never thought of that” or asking short questions such as “What exactly do you mean?” or “What happened next?” can promote a conversation and open lines of understanding to each other.

Step 3 is called mirror or reflective listening. When we listen in this way, we become like a mirror, reflecting back what has been said to us. This means that we reflect upon the feelings behind the words. Let’s go back to the first example.

Parent: Where have you been, young lady? It’s past midnight and you’re two hours late! You simply can’t be trusted!

Daughter: Sounds like you’ve been really worried about me. (*Identifies underlying feeling and reflects it back to the parent.*)

Parent: I sure have! I’ve been going out of my mind with worry. What happened? (*Calms down enough to ask a question.*)

Daughter: The bus broke down, and I had to walk to the next stop to wait for another one. I tried to call, but the only phone close by was broken. I’m really sorry. (*Gets a chance to explain.*)

Parent: Well, at least you tried to call. The important thing is that you’re home safely. (*A fight is avoided.*)

In using reflective listening, the best way to start is by saying something like “I bet you’re feeling ...” or “are you saying that ...” or “I guess that makes you feel ...” and then filling in the feeling. However, there may be words to use that would describe the underlying feelings of your parents even better. For example:

Parent: You never want to do anything with your family. You’re always away with your friends.

While this parent is feeling anger, beneath the anger he or she may be feeling ignored and unimportant. Perhaps the parent is afraid that we don’t care about him or her anymore and don’t enjoy spending time with the family. This parent even may be feeling a little jealous.

Sometimes people hide their real feelings. We might say something like “sounds like you’re feeling angry,” not understanding that the other person is actually feeling confused or hurt. Usually this is not a problem and the other person may simply say, “No, I’m not angry, I’m confused.” But sometimes such an explanation may be misinterpreted. For example:

Daughter: Sounds like you’re feeling confused.

Parent: Don’t you tell me I’m confused! You’re the one who’s confused!

Fortunately this kind of situation is easy to fix. We just need to correct ourselves: “I guess ‘confused’ wasn’t a very good word to use. You’re probably feeling angry.” If we don’t get the feeling right the first time, we shouldn’t let it throw us off. Just try again.

A common mistake is to start out using reflective listening, but then switch over to accusations. Soon we’re back in the same old fight.

Daughter: I guess you're really annoyed at me for tying up the phone.
(Uses reflective listening.)

Mother: I sure am. I've been trying to call home for the last two hours.
How many times have I told you not to tie up the phone like that?

Daughter: Well, you don't have to yell. You're always yelling at me for everything!

Mother: Don't talk to me that way! You stay off the phone the rest of the night.

If the daughter had stayed with reflective listening, things might have turned out better.

Daughter: I guess you're really annoyed at me for tying up the phone.
(Uses reflective listening.)

Mother: I sure am! I've been trying to call home for the last two hours.
How many times have I told you not to tie up the phone like that!

Daughter: You must have felt like wringing my neck! (Reflects back feeling.)

Mother: I sure did! Who were you talking to for so long? (Calms down enough to ask a question.)

Daughter: I was talking to Sveta. I didn't realize how long I was on. We were discussing a science test we have tomorrow. We were just chatting.
(Has a chance to explain.)

Mother: Well, things have to change, because sometimes I need to reach you before I come home from work. I wanted you to take the chicken out of the freezer. But now there's not enough time for the chicken to defrost.

Daughter: Maybe we could have that leftover meat loaf. Maybe from now on I could stay off the phone until you're home. (Instead of fighting, they solve the problem.)

What if our parents deny, ridicule or in some way belittle our feelings?

Of course, we may feel hurt and angry. Still, try to stick with this type of communication, since accusations only make things worse. However, you may need to talk to someone else about it, such as your other parent, a grandparent, an older brother or sister, a teacher or a friend.

Improving communication skills isn't easy. It takes effort, commitment and respect. But when we invest in relationships, the quality of our lives and the lives of others improves. We can practice these skills not only with our parents but also with many different people in different situations. With practice and perseverance these skills will develop and grow, becoming a natural part of our lives.

Group Exercise



Dialogue A

In your class, select two students to read the following dialogue between a teenager and her mother:

Mother: "Where do you think you are going dressed like that at ten o'clock on a school night? Do you always have to sneak around? Why can't you act more like your older sister Masha?" *(The mother is immediately accusing).*

Daughter: "Mom, you're always on my back! I was just going to take the dog out for a walk. Why do you always assume I'm doing something wrong? Plus, you always compare me to Masha, and I hate it!" *(The daughter counters with a defense that her mother is always accusing her, and makes a generalization).*

Mother: "You say you are just going to take the dog out for a walk? Am I supposed to believe that? Are you lying again? Is your boyfriend outside waiting for you?" *(The mother ignores her daughter's statement, and comes up with another attack)*

Daughter: "You're always accusing me! I'm just doing what I'm supposed to do! You never listen to me! You really hate me, don't you?" *(The daughter contributes to the breakdown of the conversation, bringing in more generalizations).*

Mother: "You have no respect! You treat me like a prison guard. Just go to your room. Maybe you can think about your obnoxious behavior and come out with an apology. You cause me so much grief!" *(Total communication breakdown).*



Group Exercise



continued

Dialogue B

Now, have another two students read the following dialogue:

Mother: "Where do you think you are going dressed like that at ten o'clock on a school night? Do you always have to sneak around? Why can't you act more like your older sister Masha?" *(The mother is immediately accusing).*

Daughter: "I was just going to take the dog out for his walk." *(The daughter answers in a non-defensive tone).*

Mother: "Oh, really? Dressed like that? I would have thought you were going to try out for the main role in a Hollywood film." *(The mother, not responding, is still accusing).*

Daughter: "When I am only trying to fulfill my responsibility, I feel really upset to be made fun of for dressing the way I like to dress." *(The daughter expresses herself without accusing her mother).*

Mother: "I know, but it really bothers me to see you dressing up like some kind of fashion model." *(Still accusing).*

Daughter: "I don't mean to upset you, Mom. Please tell me what in particular bothers you." *(She doesn't make a counter attack, but instead acknowledges her mother's statement).*

Mother: "I just want you to dress like a decent young lady. Please put on a longer skirt. Then you may go ahead." *(Still not communicating very well, but the daughter could defuse the situation somewhat).*

See the Appendix for the psychological test pertaining to this lesson.