

Parenting - communicating with children

Parenting is all about communicating with your child. Positive two-way communication is essential to building your child's self-esteem. Children thrive with words of encouragement and praise. There are simple things you can do to improve how you communicate with your child.

If you set up clear and open communication patterns with your child in their early years, you are setting up good practices for the future.

Positive communication

Children's ability to manage stress, feel confident and motivate themselves in later life has a lot to do with their early childhood experiences. A person's 'self-concept' is their sense of who they are and how they feel about their place in their family and community. This begins to develop between the ages of two and six years.

Positive relationships between parents and children are an important part of building a child's positive self-concept. A child who feels constantly blamed, judged and criticised may grow up to become an adult with a negative self-concept.

You can help your child develop a positive self-concept by using positive communication. For example:

- Pay attention, respect your child's feelings and watch the tone of your voice.
- Respect your child's right to their opinion, no matter how young they are.
- Allow important or difficult issues to be discussed without the fear of uproar, criticism or blame.

Listen to your child

If you want your child to be a good listener, make sure you're a good role model. Take the time to listen to them. Busy, distracted parents tend to tune out a chattering child, which is understandable from time to time. If you constantly ignore your child, however, you send the message that listening isn't important and that what your child has to say isn't important to you.

Some suggestions include:

- Pay attention to what your child is saying whenever you can.
- Make sure to allocate some time every day to simply sit and listen to your child if you have a busy schedule.
- Encourage your child's ideas and opinions. Positive communication is a two-way street in which both parties take turns listening and talking.
- Resist the urge to correct their grammatical errors or finish their sentences – concentrate instead on what they are trying to say.

Build up positive self-esteem

Positive, encouraging words help children to feel confident and happy. Suggestions include:

- Catch them being good! Praise them for tidying up their rooms or taking turns. Praise reinforces good behaviour.
- Thank them for helping you around the house or at the supermarket.

- Let them know you have faith in their abilities. A child who is constantly told to be careful or that they will hurt themselves will eventually lose confidence in their abilities.
- Allow them plenty of opportunities to do things they enjoy and do well. Feeling competent builds self-esteem.
- Praise their efforts, not just their results. A child needs to know that it is okay to fail.
- Try to avoid constantly correcting your child's mistakes. Trial and error are part of every child's life. Your child may feel discouraged and hopeless if their every effort is graded and criticised.
- Separate the child from their behaviour. Disapprove of the activity, not the child. For a child's positive sense of self, it is better to say 'drawing on the walls was a naughty thing to do' rather than 'you're a naughty child'. Your child needs to know that your love is unconditional.
- Don't assume that they know how much you love them – tell them often.
- Tell the child what you **do** want them to do rather than what you **don't**. In most cases, it's simple to turn a negative sentence into a positive one. For example, instead of saying 'Don't walk so close to the road', say 'Come and walk next to me'.

Body language

Actions speak louder than words. Remember that the way you say something carries weight. Suggestions include:

- Squat down to the same level as the child instead of towering over them.
- Maintain eye contact with young children. Remember, though, that older children and adolescents often don't like this, so chatting while you're walking along or driving in the car can be more effective.
- Smile. A child will respond better to a smile rather than a frown.
- Avoid talking to them when your back is turned or when you are walking away from them.
- Use a gentle tone of voice, especially if tempers are starting to fray. Yelling only encourages more anger.
- Cuddle children often (no matter how old they are).
- Avoid impatient body language like eye rolling, foot tapping or sighing. This can discourage a child from talking.

Positive phrases

Children thrive with words of encouragement and praise. You could say things like:

- Good job
- You did that really well
- I'm very proud of you
- I like playing with you
- That's a beautiful painting
- That was a great try
- You're so thoughtful
- Thanks for helping
- You've got a great memory
- That's amazing
- Great idea!
- You did it!
- Let's play!

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family counsellor
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321 Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm, Saturday, 10am to 4pm
- Other parents

Things to remember

- Positive communication with children means paying attention, respecting the child's feelings and watching your tone of voice.
- If you have a busy schedule, make sure to allocate some time every day to simply sit and listen to your child.
- Children thrive with words of encouragement and praise.

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