
Young children and communication

Summary

- 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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Parenting is all about communicating with your child. Positive two-way communication is essential to building your child's self-esteem. While children thrive with words of encouragement and praise, listening to your child boosts their self-esteem and enables them to feel worthy and loved.

It is worth remembering that children can understand language long before they can master speech. You can keep up with your child's evolving language development by paying daily attention to them.

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 with young children

A child'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.

Listen to your children

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.
- Allow important or difficult issues to be discussed without the fear of over-reaction, criticism or blame.

Communicating with your baby

A baby's brain is 'hard-wired' to pay attention to the sound of a human voice. Their mastery of language depends on listening to you speak. Long before your baby can form understandable words, they will respond to you with noises, facial expressions and body language.

You can actively listen to your baby and encourage their language development in many ways, including:

- Accept that crying is your baby's primary method of communication.
- Attend to their needs as soon as you can once they start crying, to let them know they have been acknowledged and understood.
- Spend some time actively listening to your baby's cooing and noise-making by looking them in the eye and encouraging them with smiles and talk.
- Talk to your baby frequently about anything and everything. You can also read to them from books and the daily paper.

Communicating with your toddler

A toddler may have a vocabulary of two hundred or so words and can start stringing words together to make simple sentences. Mastering grammar and sentence construction is difficult and your toddler will make plenty of mistakes.

You can encourage your toddler's language development in many ways, such as:

- It is more important to listen attentively to your child than to correct their grammatical errors.
- Allow your toddler sufficient time to finish what they are trying to say.
- Don't show impatient body language, such as sighing or foot-tapping.
- Answer any questions using simple language.
- Spend some time each day doing nothing else but talking exclusively with your toddler.
- A child that constantly interrupts adult conversations may be feeling starved of attention.

Communicating with an older child

By the time your child is in their later years of primary school, their language and ability to convey ideas has improved a lot. They even alter their speech to suit the circumstances. They may speak more formally in front of a teacher than they do with family and friends.

You can show that you are actively listening to your older child in many ways, including:

- Make time every day to listen exclusively to your child without distractions.
- If your child tends to give 'yes' and 'no' answers, try asking open-ended questions such as 'What was the best thing about school today?'
- Allow your child to have differences of opinion and respect their point of view.
- Try not to interrupt, lecture or criticise.

Build up positive self-esteem in young children

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

- Notice when they are 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 always correcting your child's mistakes. Trial and error are part of every child's life. Your child may feel discouraged and hopeless if all their efforts are marked or 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 communication with young children

Actions speak louder than words. Remember that the way you say something is important. 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 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 for young children

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!

Help for family communication problems

betterhealth.vic.gov.au

There are services available to help families with any type of communication problem. For example, you may need help if:

- You think your baby or child has difficulty hearing
- Your toddler isn't speaking at all by two years of age
- Your child doesn't understand what you say by two years of age
- Your child stutters or has some other form of speech difficulty
- You have problems communicating with your child.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321 Monday to Friday, 8 am to 8 pm, Saturday, 10 am to 4 pm
- Family counsellor
- Your community health centre
- Maternal and child health nurse

Things to remember

- Positive communication with children means paying attention, respecting the child's feelings and watching your tone of voice.
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