

Effective family communication

Strong relationships are built on healthy communication and understanding

People communicate all the time, but communicating well – especially with those we are close to – takes thoughtful, ongoing effort. In close relationships it is important to be able to communicate effectively about feelings, needs and wants, ideas and opinions. The most important part of effective communication is listening. Children as well as adults will talk more if they are confident they will be listened to.

Make the most of opportunities to talk

Talking about everyday things helps family members feel connected. It builds trust and makes it easier to ask for and offer support. Making time to listen and show your interest encourages family members to talk and lets you understand how they think and feel. Listening actively helps to build relationships and communication skills.

To get children to talk more, notice the times when they do talk. Often this is while doing everyday things like household chores or playing games together. Use these relaxed times to get a conversation going with them. Similarly, it is important to make sure that the adults in the family have relaxed times to talk together.

Take extra care when talking about problems

Communication can get complicated when strong feelings are involved. For both children and adults, talking about things that are bothering them is often hard. When family members feel supported and safe, difficult issues can be addressed more effectively. Tune into feelings and take a caring approach.

Asking how the other family member feels, and listening non-defensively, allows you to work together to solve problems. Blaming, judging or criticising will quickly shut down real communication and very often leads to arguments. Listening well to others and explaining your own feelings and views (eg “I’m disappointed that...” or “I’m upset that...”), rather than accusing others (eg “You don’t care...” or “You’ve upset me...”), helps to defuse arguments and supports effective communication.

Avoid escalating conflicts

In any family there are bound to be conflicts and arguments. When conflict is handled constructively it can help to strengthen relationships. However, angry clashes and harsh words can lead to hurt feelings and cause damage to relationships.

If you find that anger is getting in the way of being able to see the other person’s point of view, take time out to calm down (eg go for a walk, do some active relaxation such as deep breathing) before trying to deal with the issue. Making angry accusations about the other person will very likely escalate the conflict. Own your feelings (eg “I’m *really* disappointed and angry about this mess”) rather than attacking others (eg “You’re always so selfish”).

Repair damage and rebuild relationships

In any family, as in any close relationship, feelings *will* get hurt. You may say things in the heat of the moment that you don’t mean or wish you hadn’t said. Being ready to apologise, to listen to how the other person feels, and to show you appreciate their position is a critical skill for building strong and supportive family relationships.

