

Ten Tips for Effective Communication with Your Child

by Minette Riordan, Ph.D.

1. Start Early.

From the time your child can speak in short sentences, practice having a conversation. Teach him how to answer questions, answer his questions with enthusiasm and focus on topics he is interested in. Encourage him to tell you stories and share information about his day when he has been away from you (at preschool, grandma's house, a playdate, etc.) Make conversation a regular part of your time together. Tell him about your day, too, so he can practice listening. Don't expect miracles or long attention spans from a preschooler, keep your answers short, share a favorite moment or an accomplishment you are proud of. By modeling conversation skills, your child will become an effective communicator in all areas of his life.

2. Timing is everything!

Choose the right time – Initiating a conversation when your child is watching television, playing with a favorite toy or busy text messaging is not a good idea. Whenever you want to talk to your child make sure she is in the mood to listen and there is nothing to distract her. Instead of conversing at home, go out together for a walk, sit on the couch, curl up together in her bed. This will put you both at ease and talking will be easy. You will be sure you have her undivided attention.

3. Pay attention! Be an active listener.

I remember being a teenager and constantly trying to get my mother's attention while she was on the phone. I wanted answers and I wanted them now. Now my own children do the same thing to me. They hang on the arm of the chair, pull on my clothes while I am on the phone, scream from across the house, etc. Even though they have been playing happily for the last hour, as soon as the phone rings, they need my attention. I have learned to tell the person on the phone to hold on for a second, I turn to my child and say politely and with respect, "I am on the phone right now, I can talk to you in 5 minutes." I do this with email, too. It doesn't always work but they hear me over and over asking for their respect and they are learning that if they can wait 5 minutes, they will have all of my attention (which is all they really want, they are not really hungry, thirsty, in desperate need of a new Barbie, etc.) When I talk to my children, I try to give them all of my attention and really listen to what they are saying. I show them that I am genuinely interested in what they are doing, in their day at school, the latest tiff with their sibling, the extravagant description of the latest Lego creation. I do this by being attentive and maintaining constant eye contact. I will let the phone ring (this one is hard for me), put down my book or magazine and just listen.

4. Keep your emotions under control.

While talking to your child there will be times when you will not like what you hear. Try to be as composed on the outside as possible even if you are boiling on the inside. If you scold your child when she tells you something, she will shrink away from sharing in future. Anger acts as a negative reinforcement. Refrain from it and be soothing and reassuring. If you are too angry to talk to your child, don't. Take a time out and wait until you can talk with your child calmly. My son came in crying from the pool the other

day, his father had made him leave because he wouldn't stop antagonizing his sister (shooting her with water, dumping her off the floatie, splashing and anything else he could think of to get her attention, which caused her to scream hysterically – she is our drama queen). His father had already dealt with the immediate situation and I thanked my son for sharing the story with me. I did not add to his dismay by being angry, I just listened and off he went, having accepted the consequences but also having been able to relieve some of his frustration by sharing the story. Be a safe haven for your child. We all need to have someone we can safely express our emotions to without fear of judgment or repercussion.

5. Abstain from imposing your ideas.

Parents tend to impose their thoughts consciously or unconsciously. This thwarts the whole purpose of a conversation. Instead of enforcing your beliefs on your child be patient and explain your side. Chances are that your child will sooner or later listen to you and also agree with you. Agree with your child's opinion on what you think is right. A democratic approach is always better than an authoritative one.

6. Put in words of encouragement.

When your child shares with you make sure you thank her. This will not only give your child the positive message that you are receptive but will also make her more open and she will talk to you more. Encouraging sentences like “I am so glad you shared that information” or “I loved talking to you. Let us do this more often” will inspire your child to continue talking to you. Appraise the fact that your daughter has disclosed to you things which she might have considered highly personal. Remember, you can also invite conversation; it shows you still care.

7. Maintain respect at all times.

Avoid putting your child down in any way. If she admits to having done something which you find unfavorable, do not insult her. While conversing allow free sharing and expressing of ideas and words. Keep your cool at all times. Find solutions together through brainstorming. When you reach a solution ask two simple questions: “Are you willing...?” and “Will you make a commitment to...?” Regular communication will boost your child's confidence and her trust in you. It will also help you develop strong bonds of understanding.

8. Schedule time to talk with your children

Family Dinners, Family Meetings, Date Nights or Nature Walks are all great ways to spend time talking with your children. I heard a statistic recently that the number one way to insure that your children don't become involved in drugs and other illegal activities is to have dinner together every night. We are all so busy and have such hectic schedules, our children included, that we may forget that we need to plan time to be together. Even if you can't make it to the dinner table every night, try for two or three nights a week. Schedule it just like you would a doctor's appointment or soccer practice. There is nothing better that you can do for your children than show them how important they are to you by scheduling special time to be with them. I encourage you to not only schedule time together as a family, but to schedule some one on one time with each of your children. I heard one story from a mom who had 4 children and had recently lost her

husband. She knew each of the children needed her undivided attention. So each Saturday when she did the grocery shopping, she would take one child along with her and they would do something special together like get an ice cream after shopping.

9. Teach your kids to express their feelings with words.

From the time our kids were very young, we helped them express their feelings with words. I was visiting with an older gentleman recently and I told him that my daughter told me she was feeling nervous. He said, "How did she know she is nervous, she is only 5, that's a big word. She must have heard it from someone else." I patiently explained to him that we have learned to teach our children feeling words to describe their emotions. Kids have just as many emotions as we do and can be very frustrated when they don't know how to express those emotions, so they scream, cry, rant and rave. It is much harder to calm a screaming child than one who can articulate "I am sad, hurt, angry, etc." Helping them articulate their feelings will give them the confidence to speak up for themselves in many social situations throughout their life.

10. Ask the right type of questions.

This may be the most important skill you can learn as a parent, along with active listening. The first thing to remember is to ask open-ended questions, not yes/no questions. I quickly learned when my son started Kindergarten, that if I just asked how his day was, all I got in response was "fine, great, etc." I had to be creative - "Who did you sit next to at lunch today?" "What did you do at recess, in math class, reading, etc.?" The more specific the question, the lengthier the answer. When your children learn from a young age that you are asking because you are genuinely interested in them and their life (not interfering or spying on them as some teens may accuse you of) they will happily share their experiences and know that they can trust you to listen and not react to or judge what happened.

Here are some great conversation ideas from Dr. Cindy Dormer author of *Hold That Thought for Kids*. To find out more about her, visit www.holdkids.com.

- *What is your favorite...?*

Think of as many categories as possible including playthings (inside, outside, tub toy, etc.) foods (fruit, vegetable, dessert, etc), things to do (at a playground, on a rainy day, at each friend's house, on the weekend, in the evening, etc), color, animal, number, song, book, etc...

- *What is something you particularly like about...?*

Finish the question with any variety of things that make sense for your family. Ask about favorite activities, parts of day, each season, each holiday, family members (including the troublesome sibling!), friends, your family heritage, things in nature, pets, etc...

- *What would you do if...?*

Think through all the situations in which you hope your child would make safe decisions, display good manners, or behave gracefully in challenging social situations (like being rejected by a friend). Make this fun sometimes with twists like—"What would you do if you found dinosaur eggs in your backpack?"

- *What is something you know about...?*

Ants; pickup trucks; photosynthesis; the president; current events; getting along with others; weddings; your best friend's favorites; Dad and Mom's work; your brother's/sister's school...

- *What is something you remember about the time when...*

We first got this car; a baby sitter took care of you; we went on vacation; something got broken; you were proud of yourself; you were really mad but you did the right thing; your sister/brother helped you; your preschool days; first grade; visits to Grandma and Grandpa's...

- *Ask trivia questions*

Good trivia topics for kids include history (what happened last weekend); geography (your block, neighborhood, city, the world); politics; religion; money; family values; the relatives; biology; professions...

To further expand your communication skills as a parent visit

<http://www.academyforcoachingparents.com>. Some of these tips were the expert advice of Dr. Caron Goode, founder of ACPI. Academy for Coaching Parents International (ACPI) provides a distance-learning program with course materials for five subject areas that will prepare students to operate their own Parent Education and Parent Coaching business.

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