

# Positive Family Communication

by Sandra J. Bailey, Ph.D., CFLE, Family and Human Development Specialist

**This guide provides verbal and nonverbal techniques that can help improve family communication.**



## MontGuide

MT200916HR New 09/09

**GOOD FAMILY RELATIONS ARE BUILT ON STRONG** communication. It creates and keeps strong family ties; this is true for how we talk with any family member.

Communication is how we send and receive messages in ways that create understanding. It is how and what we say or don't say. Most communication is nonverbal. Our body language, expression on our face, and tone of voice give others more information than what is said.

### Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication has many functions.

- First, it gives us information about the sender's mood or intent of the message.
- Next, it helps to control the conversation. It tells us when the speaker is done talking. This can also help us know how long the conversation should be. When trying to speak to a person who appears rushed, we are likely to cut our conversation short.
- Finally, nonverbal communication is dictated by the relationship we share with the other person. For example, how we speak to our boss is different from how we talk to our spouse.

We express nonverbal communication in several ways. Our facial expression is the way we tell others about our emotions and mood. Smiles and frowns have the same meaning no matter what culture one is from.

Eye contact is a nonverbal way to show a person whether or not you are paying attention. Maintaining eye contact lets the speaker know you are listening. Gazing past a person tells him that you are not interested.

Our posture also sends nonverbal messages. Sitting at the same level with a person is less threatening than standing over them. This is also true if you are at the same eye level. Avoid crossing your arms; a speaker with crossed arms conveys the message of being closed-off, angry or disinterested.

### Making Time for Conversation

Families today are busy. School, children's activities, and parents' work schedules make it hard to find time to spend together. According to Dr. William Doherty, families today spend less time eating meals together. They have fewer family talks. Children have less free time. Family members have more scheduled time and less time to talk and enjoy one other, so it is important for families to make time to talk.

One place many families find to talk is in the car. Today's families spend a good deal of time in the car going from one activity to another. Parents might make time to talk to children at bedtime. Another idea is to have "dates" with a family member to spend one-on-one time. Having a family meal together is a good way to find time to talk.

### Learning Skills for Meaningful Conversation

Busy parents sometimes think they are listening to their children, but may not really hear what they are saying. Children often won't talk when asked too many questions. When your child comes home from school, try using a conversation starter with a question that can't be answered by "yes" or "no." For example, "What was the best part of school today?" Sometimes saying nothing can start a conversation. One mother said the best way to get her teenage son to start talking was by simply being in the house but not saying anything. After a time he would start sharing his thoughts.

When talking with your spouse about a sensitive topic try using "I" statements. "I really feel unappreciated when I find dirty socks in the living room. I wish socks would be put in the dirty clothes hamper." You are telling your spouse how you feel, why you feel that way, and what you would like to see done differently. This method is much less threatening than, "You always leave your socks in the

living room and you don't care about all the work I do in this house." This statement sounds like the start of an argument.

Reflecting on what your child tells you also helps to open communication. For example, if your child comes home saying, "I hate school," instead of asking why, try using reflection. "Sounds like you had a rough day at school." This validates the child's feelings and lets him know that you are listening. More likely than not, he will start to tell you about what is bothering him.

Restating what is said is another skill to support good communication. For example, "I am so angry because no one in this house puts my tools away." Try restating the concern by saying "Am I hearing you correctly that you can't find some of your tools?" In this way you can be sure that you understand the problem. If you are not right, the other person can clarify.

Allowing the other person to finish talking before you begin is another good skill. This sounds simple but is often hard to do. We find this to be especially true with our family members. Why? Because we have stronger feelings about our family members than we do with people who are not part of our family.

## Managing Family Communication

With cell phones, busy schedules, and children's activities keeping family members informed can be challenging. Some families use a white board to list each member's activities by date and time. Others may use day planners. Still others write activities on a calendar. Make a system that works for your family. Find a place to note each family member's schedule. This helps to avoid miscommunication about important events.

Be respectful of other family members. Have a place for family members to leave notes about where they are and what time they will be home. A white board or a desk with a notepad can be helpful. Ask that everyone use the same place to post a note.

## Family Meetings

Family meetings are a chance for family members to discuss family issues. Topics you might include are schedules, events, and/or problems. There are many ways to have a family meeting. Some are more formal than others. Make sure all family members can attend. Have ground rules. Ground rules might include:

- no interrupting others
- no yelling or swearing
- no putting others down
- use "I" statements
- a willingness to listen to another's point of view

You might want to select a family member to facilitate the meeting. Some families have one person who writes down what was decided at the meeting as a reminder.

## Family Communication Networks

Families have different ways in which the members communicate. This often is related to how the family identifies who is in charge.

Some families have one person who is the center of communication. Often this is the mother. This network looks like a wheel. Communication lines go from the mother at the center to each family member. The mother controls the messages and can adapt them as needed with each family member.

Other families may use a chain network. One person is in charge at the top giving messages to the next person down the line. This person then gives it to the next person down and so on. In busy families this type of communication may be needed. The problem with this "top down" approach is that only the second person in the chain hears the complete message.

Many stepfamilies use a "Y" type communication. The children are at the top points of the "Y" and the mother in the middle. The stepfather is at the bottom of the "Y." Messages to the children are given through the mother. This network may be useful as the members work to become a new family.

Messages in the networks discussed above are filtered through one person. Sometimes this is needed. It may help reduce family conflict. The problem is that it could also produce misunderstandings. The person who sent the message does not talk directly to all those who receive it.

A fourth network style is the "all-channel" network. In this setting each family member talks directly with each other. There is no filtering of information. This style is used more when children are older. The information does not get distorted with this style; however it is not as effective when information needs to get to everyone quickly.

Families with good communication use a mix of communication networks. That is because each type of network can be useful in a specific situation. What is important is that all family members feel heard and valued.

## References

Galvin, K. M. & Brommel, B. J. (1999). *Family communication: Cohesion and change*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.

Miller, R. S. & Perlman, D. (2009). *Intimate relationships*, (5th Ed.). Boston: McGraw Hill Publishing.

University of Minnesota (Producer). (2004). *Take back your family time: A discussion with Dr. Bill Doherty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

We would like to acknowledge the following individuals who reviewed earlier drafts of this guide:

- Dr. Harriet Shaklee, University of Idaho Extension Family Development Specialist
- Judy Johnson, Richland County Extension Agent
- Adele Stenson, Pondera County Extension Agent
- Katelyn Anderson, Ravalli County Extension Agent



## How Do You Communicate With Your Family?

After reading this guide, list three positive things you do when communicating with your spouse/partner:

---

---

---

Next, list areas you would like to change:

---

---

---

---

Now list three positive ways you communicate with your children:

---

---

---

Next, list areas you would like to change:

---

---

---

---

Keep these lists and review them in two months. Ask yourself, have I made some positive changes in how I communicate with my family members? What is working and what is not working?



To order additional publications, please contact your county or reservation MSU Extension office, visit our online catalog at [www.msuextension.org/publications.asp](http://www.msuextension.org/publications.asp) or e-mail [orderpubs@montana.edu](mailto:orderpubs@montana.edu)

Copyright © 2009 MSU Extension

We encourage the use of this document for nonprofit educational purposes. This document may be reprinted for nonprofit educational purposes if no endorsement of a commercial product, service or company is stated or implied, and if appropriate credit is given to the author and MSU Extension. To use these documents in electronic formats, permission must be sought from the Extension Communications Coordinator, 115 Culbertson Hall, Montana State University, Bozeman MT 59717; E-mail: [publications@montana.edu](mailto:publications@montana.edu)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Montana State University and Montana State University Extension prohibit discrimination in all of their programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital and family status. Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Douglas L. Steele, Vice Provost and Director, Montana State University Extension, Bozeman, MT 59717.



**File under: Home, Health and Family  
(Families and Parenting)  
New September 2009 1000-909SA**