
Foundations for Families – Family context

6 Parenting skills - communicating

Reading – Proverbs 8:1-11 *Keywords* – wisdom; understanding; prudence; instruction; knowledge

Communicating clearly

One important aspect of being a parent is communicating clearly with each other and with children. It is important that parents talk with each other about their goals. These goals might embrace many aspects of bringing up children, from everyday 'yes' or 'no' situations to longer term goals such as schooling. Open, tense, disagreements between parents in the children's presence can make life very confusing for them. And, children can be very astute and try to manipulate their parents sometimes, especially when they see that parents disagree.

Day to day communication with children

It is vital that we are positive in our communication. At the same time, what we say must be kind, thoughtful and loving. We won't always be perfect in what we say or the way we say it. It is important, however, that we try to use the appropriate principles. Choose words carefully and convey exactly what we want our children to hear or do.

What children really hear

Here are some examples of poor communication with children. Why are they poor?

Would you like to hold my hand as we cross the road?

I want you to pick up your toys.

Don't pick at your food.

Now children, I can hear a lot of noise coming from your room (said in a suitably admonishing tone and loud voice!)

Rephrase the examples so that the communication is clearer.

Something to think about

- Dig down deeply into your own communication attempts, or what you have heard others say, (be honest!) and give some instances of poor communication with children and how you would improve them.

Getting our message across clearly

While the first step in communication with children is to ensure that we speak clearly and decisively, we shouldn't forget the importance of body language. Here are some things to think about:

Voice – tone, volume, inflection, speed of delivery

Face – smile, frown, raised eyebrow

Arms – placement (hips, extended), speed of movement

Hands – outstretched, open, palms up or down, pointing

Don't be negative when we talk

There are a number of good, positive expressions to use (and expressions not to use) when communicating with children. It's always better to make a positive statement than a negative one, although the latter may be useful in some circumstances, especially if a little fear can be useful. Too much negative instruction can produce a negative response, a kind of defiance.

So, what's wrong with the subheading above?

Things to say

Be gentle

Speak quietly

Come away, hands off

Tell the truth

Move carefully

Walk slowly

Things not to say

don't hit

don't shout

don't touch

don't lie

don't be clumsy

don't run

Something to think about

- Make a few more expressions to use for yourself – and their matching 'avoiding' expressions.

Requests and instructions

Implied in all of the above is a message that we need to distinguish between a request and an instruction. The difference is fairly simple. One asks a child to do something – which, of course, they may care to refuse, and the other makes it clear that they are required to do something – there is no choice. There is a time and place for each. In the first we may want to help a child to learn a better way of behaviour so that they can eventually become instinctive in their response to a similar situation. They are required to think about whether they accept the request or not. In the second we don't want them to think about it – just do it! Can we see that too much of either approach has disadvantages?

Something to think about

- Can we be too polite?
- Should we ever raise our voice?

Active listening

The one of the senses we have left until last is probably the most important – the ability to listen. We can talk easily – listening carefully is more difficult! Most specialists in communication insist that listening actively and attentively is crucial in any aspect of our life, and equally important in dealing with our children.

- We pay attention to what is said and respond appropriately. Comment on this example: 'I have a really exciting day today, dad, we're going swimming this afternoon.' 'That's nice. Have you finished your homework?'

- We pay attention to the way things are said and respond with a 'paraphrase'. This helps the child by indicating that we have understood what has been said. 'I'm really excited, dad.' 'Oh, so you're really thrilled are you?' 'Yes, I'm going ...' The simple repetition encourages the child to go further. It shows that you have heard what they have said. (Better than saying 'That's nice'.)

Repeating ourselves

'If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times, go and ...'

Such a statement has many problems, not the least of which is that if we've made this statement, our first, and every other 'telling' to our child must have been totally unconvincing! If we need to say something any more than twice at the most, we really do need to examine what we've said and the way we say it.

But, repetition is an important element in learning. So many things children learn are through repetition. It can be used as a very powerful instrument of learning, when it is used wisely. The example above is not a wise use. However, getting children to repeat something – either in action or in words, can be very helpful for them. Repetition is important in the learning and retention process.

Parenting with love

A fitting conclusion to this series of essays is to stop to think of what it means to parent with love. There is no doubt that love is the basis of successful parenting. And we must start with understanding the role God plays in the development of this love.

'One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.'" (Mark 12:28-31)

Something to think about

- Make your own list of parental 'loves'. They can be broad e.g. 'person love' or specific 'a-hug-a-day'.