

family development

Family Communication

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Think about recent discussions you have had where a difference of opinion was involved. Did someone make statements such as these?

“Why don’t you let me finish what I’m saying?”

“If you’ll just give me a chance, I’ll try to tell you.”

“I don’t care what you think!”

“I may as well be talking to a fence post!”

The chances are good that you have heard such remarks recently, or perhaps have spoken them yourself. These are signs of a breakdown in communication.

If the conversation was with a child, such statements as these may have been made:

“Don’t ask me why! Just do what I say.”

“Because I said so, that’s why.”

“I’m through talking about it.”

“I have already explained it a hundred times.”

Whether adults are talking with one another or with a child, such remarks point to a failure--an inability to share one’s feelings with another person or to understand how the other person feels. The result of this failure is frustration, hostility, and unsatisfactory relationships with others.

One of the most important elements in happy family life is good communication--the sharing of ideas and feelings--the exchange of messages that help family members know what they can expect to receive from, and what they should give to, others in the family. Living in a family is a form of emotional merchandising. Our family life operates on a system of supply and demand. Orders are sent out for a certain type of merchandise and the supplier rushes the order to the point of need. For example, when Ricky indicates that he is upset over a test failure at school, he may be placing an order for sympathy, understanding, encouragement, tutoring, or reassurance that he is loved in spite of his failure. His mother may have

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received his message and offered emotional and intellectual assistance. If no one receives Rick's order and fills it, he suffers and the family suffers with him.

Family communication, then, consists of the ways individuals place and fill daily orders in the world of human relationships.

Good family communication is difficult to obtain. Folk wisdom has long recognized the way that communication can become distorted. Children once played the party game called "Gossip." Everyone sat in a large circle and the leader would whisper what he heard to the next player, continuing until the message had reached the last player in the circle. The last player would tell what he heard and the leader would tell what the original message was. It was great fun when the initial statement was "George Washington was the first President of the United States," and the final message was "John ate a ton of first-class molasses." Children were learning in a crude way not to trust everything they heard, because everything is not always heard correctly. Communication is always made up of at least three elements--the sender, the message itself, and the receiver. Family communication can be compared to television broadcasting. When a program is televised, there are always three main areas where difficulty may arise. First, the message must be broadcast--sent out from the station. If something goes wrong with the camera or microphone or other pieces of equipment, communication is interrupted. Secondly, the message must be carried by electrical impulses from one point to another. Bad weather conditions or electrical impulses from nearby machinery can distort the signals being sent. Thirdly, the signals have to be picked up by a television set in the home. If a set is broken or out of adjustment, communication is stopped.

Anytime one person tries to communicate with another, these three potential trouble areas are present. The real

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message can be disturbed by the sender, the words or expressions, and the receiver. For example, a wife may wish to communicate to her husband:

- (1) "I'm afraid we're going too deeply in debt and will be in financial trouble."

But she says to her husband:

- (2) "When are you going to ask the boss for a raise?"

And the husband thinks his wife means:

- (3) "You are such a poor worker and can't provide for your family."

It would be appropriate to ask in this situation:

What was wrong with the sender?

What was wrong with the message?

What was wrong with the receiver?

As you can see, good communication is not easy to achieve, but you can improve your family life by working on your communication system. Your system is subject to breakdowns. It may have defective connections. Every system needs "service men" as well as users.

These are ways you can improve your family communication:

I. Listen with the "Third Ear."

The first two ears hear what is being said; the third ear hears what is not being said. "Hearing behind the words" is the equivalent of "reading between the lines." Sometimes it seems necessary for an individual to say just the opposite of what he really feels. It is easier to say "I hate you" than to say "I have been deeply hurt by your actions." A child who says to his teacher, "I don't care," may very well be saying, "I feel helpless." When listening--try to empathize, to put yourself into the other person's place and feel what he is feeling.

II. Don't turn off your receiver while pretending to have it on.

Have you ever realized that you have been looking directly

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at someone speaking to you without hearing a word they were saying? This is always followed by a moment of apprehension when you wonder whether you have missed anything important, and whether your “un huhs” and “hmmms” were put in at the appropriate places. Then you quickly try to pick up enough of the conversation to be able to carry on as if you had been “tuned in” all the time.

When you “turn off” your receiver in this way, you are sure to miss some of the message being transmitted. The husband who plans his rebuttal while his wife is talking is not likely to understand her feelings. If your goal is to win an argument, you are going to be concerned with what you say. If your goal is to communicate, you will be concerned with what the other person says. Listen, not to object, but to understand.

III. Don't play “judge and jury.”

When one is in a defensive position, he is usually backing away from his antagonist. One is often placed in such a position by “cross-questioning.” Such remarks as these are typical of cross-questioning:

“That's not what you said before”

“Yes, but didn't you say . . . ?”

“Why did you say . . . ?”

Within a trusting family unit, it is not our purpose to act as an investigator or as a cross-examiner. We want to make it easier for one another to express even unapproved feelings without fear of rejection.

Sometimes it is necessary for parents to make decisions or “judgements” regarding behavior of children. But parents can keep communications open by being willing to hear all the evidence before a decision is made. Children respond to fairness and recognize it when parents listen attentively to their side of a story without interrupting with “yes, but”. The cross-

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examiner tries to discredit the other person's point of view; the communicator respects and seeks to learn the other person's point of view. It is his job to help the person express his view, not to obstruct or impede his expression.

IV. Ask for and provide a "playback."

One of the best ways to determine whether an intended message is getting through to another person is to have him "playback" what he heard. If the message which comes back is the same as the one sent, communication has been effective. If the returned message is different, the sender has an opportunity to correct the misunderstanding.

If you are providing the playback, you can begin by saying, "Now let me tell you what I have understood, and you can see if it is correct." You have an opportunity here to include what you have heard with the "third ear."

V. Lay down your weapons.

Let's pretend that each individual has a shield which can be used to block communication. When is he most likely to hide behind his shield? He will use it when he feels threatened by another person--when someone is throwing verbal spears at him. Communication is possible only when each person feels safe enough to throw away his protective shield.

The "weapons" which most often interfere in human relationships are:

- (a) personal attacks (You are no good, stupid, etc.)
- (b) accusations (You are to blame)
- (c) punishment (I am going to hurt you)
- (d) deprivation (I won't have anything to do with you)
- (e) exposure (I'm going to tell others about you)

Any attitude which makes another person protect himself by hiding or dodging can disrupt communication. If we want someone to meet us openly, let's try to make it easy for him by

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discarding the things which hurt.

VI. Remember that you can communicate without speaking.

People who cannot speak have developed body communication into a full and expressive system which most of us call "sign language." All of us use body language more than we realize. Write by the side of each of these things what it communicates to you:

a furrowed brow—

a raised eyebrow—

a trembling chin—

a clenched fist—

a smile—

a pointing finger—

twinkling eyes—

flashing eyes—

blushing face—

You can think of other forms of body communication. All these actions carry a message for other people. By paying attention to what people do as well as what they say, we have a better chance of understanding how they feel.

The body often sends out one message while the voice is sending another. A wife sometimes tells her husband that nothing is bothering her while she is blinking back uncontrollable tears. A husband tosses and turns and cannot go to sleep, but tells his wife that he is not worried. Communications are

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improved when all messages being sent out simultaneously are consistent. When conflicting messages are sent, the listener doesn't know which is correct or how to respond.

VII. Send positive messages.

"What came in the mail today, Darling?"

"Nothing--except bills!"

What would happen to our mail system if we never received anything except bills, worthless ads, and bad news? We would soon dread the arrival of the postman, and might stop opening the mailbox altogether. This is what occurs in family communication systems that only carry negative information.

In most instances, we express our bad or negative feelings without much effort. The good feelings are the ones we take for granted.

We strengthen our communication abilities by transmitting ideas that are gladly received, such as:

congratulations ("I was glad to hear about your success.")

appreciation ("Thank you for the excellent meal.")

praise ("You look very attractive today.")

happiness ("Let me share this good news with you.")

VIII. Allow the expressions of unpleasant feelings.

For a family to get along, the unpleasant things have to be expressed too. When an individual tries to let others know about his resentment, his family members may try to block what he is saying, or to smoothe things over without really accepting his feelings.

One of the most common expressions is "You shouldn't feel that way!" But why not? Bad feelings are as real as good ones. Children get angry and have a right to be angry. Parents are often frustrated and disappointed and have a right to be so.

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When we allow others to be honest about the way we feel, we encourage good communication. The problem is not to hide unpleasant feelings, but to learn how to control them. Putting bad feelings into words is probably the healthiest way of handling them.

IX. Communicate about your communication.

If our messages to one another are not clear, we can back off and look at them from a distance, obtaining an objective view of what is happening. We can discuss the words, attitudes, and actions which seem to cause trouble. The wife can tell her husband what he does that upsets her and makes her unwilling to listen. The husband can relate something about his defenses, the patterns of behavior which protect him from his wife's feelings. A family can discuss these kinds of behavior in terms of why they occur, what reaction they provoke in others, the way they hamper communication, and how they may be changed or controlled. For example, what is going on when these things occur:

- Raising the tone of voice when arguing
- Giving the "silent treatment"
- Jumping to unjustified conclusions
- "Putting off" the discussion until a later time
- Feeling sorry for oneself
- Refusing to listen to an explanation

If a family is having trouble communicating, it makes sense to seek the cause of the difficulty. The search for better understanding can itself be an example of better communication, and can demonstrate to a family how they can succeed when they try.

There is no "instant" program for good family communications. But it is something which is available to those families which work at it. Don't try to accomplish everything at once, and don't give up because of a few failures.

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Consider these suggestions as “telephone poles” which must be erected to build your communication system. Pick out only one of these, and see that it is well established in your family. Then re-read the suggestions and select another to work on.

You will have the best success when every member of the family feels that good communication is his personal responsibility.