



BRIGHT FUTURES  TOOL FOR FAMILIES

Communicating with Children

Children develop a sense of their own self-worth and of how you feel about them from how you communicate with them. This tool offers information and ideas that may help foster communication between you and your child.

LISTENING TO CHILDREN

- Listen with your feelings and your eyes, not just your ears. Watch for and respond to your child's attempts to communicate.
- Your child will often express himself indirectly, especially when he is experiencing strong emotions. His actions usually reflect feelings more effectively than words (e.g., he may slink away when ashamed or jump up and down when proud).
- The best listening is silent listening. Keep your eyes on your child, and do not engage in other activities while you are listening.
- During early childhood, children often express themselves through stories about other people, imaginary friends, or animals who do things that the children would like to do or are afraid of or feel guilty about doing.
- If you sense that your child is feeling a certain emotion, she probably is. Ask her about it, or guess, and request feedback.
- Rephrase what your child is saying to reflect both its content and its feelings without adding your own interpretation. Say something like,



"I hear you saying _____."

"You seem to feel _____."

Be aware that your posture and tone of voice can affect how your child communicates with you. You may need to help your child put

words to the feelings that he is expressing through body language or actions. Pausing before immediately suggesting solutions or giving directives allows your child a chance to solve the problem on his own.

- When listening to your child, try not to let your own emotions show to an extent that may limit your child's sense of being free to express herself. Be nonjudgmental about your child's expression of feelings, even when limits for her actions are needed.

TALKING TO CHILDREN

- Keep praise, instructions, and corrections short, simple, and specific, even for very verbal children. This increases the chances that your child will get the message rather than get distracted.

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Communicating with Children (continued)

- Give praise or thanks for small, specific actions, rather than making generalizations that your child may not believe (e.g., "You combed your hair so well!" rather than, "You're the best girl in the world!").
- Ask a follow-up question to show you are really interested.
- Aim for praise to outnumber correction by 10 to 1.
- Provide comments to your child frequently to let him know you are thinking about him.
- Use plenty of nonverbal praise such as touches, hugs, winks, pats, or stickers.
- Praise your child's actions to other adults when she can hear you to reinforce its impact.
- Correct your child in private when possible, especially away from peers or siblings.
- Praise your child for not misbehaving in a way he might have considered (e.g., "I am proud of you for staying calm," "Thank you for not touching the plates at the store.").
- Avoid diminishing praise by adding a complaint or criticism to it (e.g., "Thanks for cleaning up your room! Why don't you do this every time I ask?").
- Use statements that begin with "I" to show your own reaction and avoid being discounted (e.g., "I really like the way you were sharing your crayons with your sister.").
- Share your own feelings both as a model and to let your child know she is not the cause of all your upsets.
- As your child gets older, work toward having her assess her own performance (e.g., "What do you think of your drawing?").

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