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COMMUNICATION IN THE FAMILY

Research shows that babies come ready to learn, at birth. As a parent, you are our child's first and most important teacher! You are the one your baby counts on to be his guide, support, comforter and special talking partner. He will learn his values, outlook and essential skills for communicating with the world, at home, within the family.

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Children are better imitators than listeners

As a parent, you are, right now, directly affecting your child's future. We teach far more through our attitudes, everyday interactions and behaviour than by direct instruction. Consider how you yourself approach the world and you will get an idea of how your child will respond, as an adult, to new ideas, to his partner and family, to the need to persevere in order to succeed, and to approaching challenges.

Why? Because children are better imitators than listeners. They don't learn because we tell them what to do. They grow through experiences and by modeling their behaviour on those they love. If Mum or Dad responds to frustration by shouting in anger, so will the child and future adult. If his role models speak disrespectfully to the maid or other family members, so will the child. The child who grows up surrounded by cherished books and lively, inclusive conversation will be keen to learn and read. The child who is respected and understood has high self-esteem and knows his ideas count.

Subconscious learning

As we go about our daily activities, working, marketing, reading, writing, cooking, cleaning or relaxing, we are sending our children subconscious messages. For example:

- Dad's much too busy to talk to you
- Homework is more important than anything else
- We make all the decisions here, your ideas don't count
- There isn't time to order our lives — tough luck if people can't keep up
- You must behave well at all costs — your feelings don't matter
- We don't have time to read, we watch TV instead
- It's only good if it's perfect

What's important is to be conscious of our communications, so that the messages we send are positive and constructive and nurture family activities. As we go about our daily routines the messages we're sending should be:

- We'll always make time for you because we love you
- We appreciate your talents and efforts at art, movement, music, and play
- Your ideas are always interesting and worth listening to
- Discipline is something we follow because we want to be purposeful and caring
- We respect each other's feelings and apologise if we hurt each other
- We want to read and learn in this family
- You can do anything because you're unique and special

So how do we practise sending positive messages to our children, at home? By enjoying healthy family activities together that promote individual development and healthy communication! Activities like conversation, outings, reading together, imaginative play and drama, fun with music, art and craft. These are all forms of play; all forms of creative communication that encourage individual expression; all family occasions that say "I value spending time with you".

Conversation is the basis of life; the heart of every family or social group. Do make time to enjoy its inherent ability to nurture, by listening to each other.

Outings put the fun into family weekends! There's so much to talk about and planning's half the attraction.

Reading together is how we learn without needing to leave home! I still remember the books I shared with my children, now 20 and 26, because they touched our hearts and imaginations.

Imaginative play and drama comes naturally to young children. Join in and learn with them, extending favourite stories by "becoming" the characters, role-playing families, professions, and animals.

The value of art, craft and music lies in our ability to take the same tools as everyone else and create a unique masterpiece unlike anyone else's. The imagination allows for grass to be purple and sky to be red, for a cow to have wings or a fish legs. Create a family painting, collage, machine or orchestra from re-cycled household containers, challenging yourselves to explore imagination through art and sound. Discuss your creations and resist all urges to "improve" your child's contribution. Once everyone realises there is no right or wrong, imagination will be bounded only by motor abilities.

Childhood is a special time to be remembered by your child and by you. With conscious family communication it will also equip your children with the biggest skills in life.

Activities for the family with young children

With children up to 2 years

- Cuddle, hold, sing, chat, play and share your life with your newborn baby who is absorbing your responses and learning all the time.
- Involve your baby in family activities.
- Read to your child, sharing pictures he can focus on and respond to.

- Establish a predictable daily routine that provides order, comfort and security.
- Talk or sing to your child about what you're doing, providing a running commentary for language absorption.
- Dance together, responding to different styles of music.
- Ask questions that give choices so your child is choosing for himself even before he can talk.

With children aged 2 to 3 years

- Enjoy activities to build language, including picture books, nursery rhymes, songs and finger play rhymes.
- Choose large, colourful books that contain clear action pictures from everyday life, encouraging children to identify actions and familiar objects.
- Cuddle up together for reading sessions to add a sense of security and enjoyment.
- Children love to imitate actions and behaviour. Create and join in role play so they begin to take another point of view and learn about other behaviour.
- Children transform things into make-believe: A pole may become a horse to ride. Play together with objects that suggest creative interpretation.
- Play at classifying and grouping things according to colour, shape, size or use.
- Help children develop a sense of security and self-esteem through opportunities to be creative and valuing their efforts at art and craft.
- Make time for conversation and include children in family discussion.

With children aged 3 to 4 years

- Create a special daily time to chat about your day and listen to your child's thoughts and observations about his activities.
- Continue to enjoy rhymes, poetry and sound games together.
- Read and share picture stories to find out about people, families and the environment.
- Children develop an understanding of relationships such as colour, size, shape, number and amount. Give them opportunities to find the correct part of a picture, to match, group and classify objects and pictures.
- Enjoy computers together. As motor skills and eye-hand co-ordination develop, they will learn to navigate quite naturally.
- Children's self concepts are affected by your attitude and behaviour so let them know you care and think they are worthy.
- Help children accept mistakes without decreasing their feelings of self-worth.
- Encourage children to become sensitive to their own feelings and those of others by talking about feelings in books, paintings, and dramatic play.
- Encourage social skills of sharing, turn-taking, and playing co-operatively by modelling these skills yourself.
- Let children be both leaders and followers in dramatic play.

With children aged 4 to 5 years

- Take advantage of natural curiosity by finding books to help answer their questions. Continue daily time for reading and discussing books.

- Extend stories by asking children to re-tell the story, surmising what else may happen and creating their own endings.
- Draw and paint together, based on a story.
- Make models and puppets of the characters to enable re-telling.
- Create a dressing-up box with old clothes for dramatic play.
- Provide opportunities for meeting different kinds of people through real-life, books and by encouraging dramatic play around different roles.
- Plan and talk about family outings, helping your child understand sequence of time and when things happen at different times of the day, week and year.
- Children begin to work by themselves, so let them work at something until it is completed to their satisfaction, a crucial skill for creative problem-solving.
- Help children identify other ways to handle problems.
- Help them understand what is new and feel comfortable with unknown situations.

With children aged 5 to 6 years

- Create and write stories together, using the child's own words. Let your child dictate descriptions of pictures and write them out for him to copy. Encourage writing, illustrating and sharing their own picture books.
- Provide daily time for reading together and allow for discussion as you read. Although your child may be reading independently now, continue to read stories together to expand his language and experience beyond what he can read himself.
- Children under seven learn through real situations, basing rules on immediate perception, so enjoy family outings to see, discuss and verify information and relationships, like trips to the zoo or the park.
- Learn through drama, imaginative play, science and cooking together.
- Encourage self-worth by praising accomplishments, sharing school and home experiences and allowing them to talk about their possessions.
- Let children help out and read to younger siblings, encouraging them to become aware that they are growing into independent people. Allow them to be responsible for different jobs around the house.

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