

HELPING OUR CHILDREN BUILD COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Communication is the process we use to create or share meaning. We do this in conversation, through group interaction, by speaking to an audience, or presentation through auditory or visual media.

The communication process is complex because it includes the participants; the context (physical, social, historical, psychological or cultural) in which the communication takes place; the messages and their many forms; the sensory channels we use to send and receive verbal signals and non-verbal cues; any external or internal interference or noise present; and the feedback received. There is so much to master!

Communication in our Lives

Communication is at the heart of how we relate to one another. By nature we are social animals and need other people just as we need food, water and shelter. Talking with acquaintances, friends, family or colleagues meets the need to contact and connect with another person. Through our communication we enhance and maintain a sense of self, by learning who we are, what we are good at and how people react to us: We see ourselves through others. We communicate to fulfill social obligations (Hi! How are you? I'm fine thank you) and to develop relationships. Some may grow and deepen, while a lack of communication leads others to stagnate and drift away. Daily, we share countless exchanges that involve passing of information, and it's doubtful that a day goes by when we don't try to influence others, through convincing or persuading them, in communication.

We create the impression that we are competent communicators through the messages we send and the nonverbal behaviours that accompany them.

Recipe for Communication Competence

For children to become competent communicators they need three key ingredients:

- Motivation to communicate and the confidence to do so. This means unconditional acceptance of their right to speak and be heard, which creates positive self-esteem.
- Knowledge of self and awareness of others, and

- Skills, or goal-oriented actions, that they can master and repeat. The more they have, the more likely they are to be able to structure messages appropriately:

What are these skills?

1. Clarity of speech, or specific, concrete, precise words to help the listener picture our thoughts accurately
2. Command of language, and grasp of a range of registers of formal and informal usage, in thinking, speaking, listening, reading, writing and viewing
3. Politeness, or the ability to relate to others in ways that meet their need to be appreciated and protected
4. Empathy, or the ability to identify with the feelings, thoughts or attitudes of others
5. Paraphrasing to enable us to reflect understanding of another person's message and discover the speaker's motivation
6. Perception checking skills to clarify the meaning of non-verbal behaviour
7. Access to emotions and ability to put an emotional state into words, to teach others how we would like to be treated
8. Assertiveness to be able to stand up for ourselves effectively, by exercising our personal rights, while respecting those of others
9. Ability to describe the basis of conflict to help others understand problems fully
10. Brainstorming skills to generate free exchange of ideas through an uncritical, non-evaluative process
11. Problem-solving skills to arrive at a conclusion about a fact, value question or policy question
12. Speech writing ability to create the exact response you want from an audience
13. Skills of research. evaluation, recording and reporting data
14. Enthusiasm; using voice and physical communication to show excitement and passion
15. Vocal expressiveness; using contrasts in pitch, pace, inflection, volume and tone quality to convey meaning
16. Spontaneity to enliven a repeated or rehearsed speech, so it is perceived as fresh and lively
17. Eye contact to strengthen interaction
18. Physical control and understanding of the use of physical energy in communication
19. Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity

How Do Children Learn?

Research tells us that:

- Children learn actively, by doing, touching, experimenting, choosing, talking and negotiating (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1991). Relationships with adults determine their social, emotional, language and cognitive development (Vygotsky 1978).
- Children need collaboration, support, reflection, instruction, modeling, direction and co-construction of meaning from the adults around them (Berk and Winsler, 1995). In other words children need adults to "scaffold" the learning, helping children to work it out for themselves. Rich verbal language is the foundation for the development of

emergent literacy. Children use and develop oral language in environments in which adults provide time, stimulation, interest and encouragement (Davidson, 1996).

- Dramatic play fosters social and emotional development (Curry & Bergen, 1988), presents a forum for cognitive development (Johnson, 1990), and encourages language development (Athey, 1988; Pelligrini, 1986).

To master effective communication skills for the 21st century, our children need a language-rich home environment, supported by sensitive, aware, interested parents and teachers who work collaboratively. Children who are nurtured through lively, interested conversation, sharing books, and talking about the world, learn to make sense of it naturally. Just as they acquire speech effortlessly, so they learn to read and write easily, through being read to, experimenting with print, exploring and constructing knowledge about literacy. Drama fosters a desire to explore, discover and build strong communication skills, by enabling children to learn actively.

Once we understand how children learn and master skills, the big questions become:

- Are we providing a home environment in which literacy flourishes because words are valued and shared?
- Are our children's teachers interested in their learning, inspiring developing communication skills?
- Do the adults who interact with our children model good communication skills for our children to learn from?
- Are our children exposed to all six forms of language so as to become masters of thinking, speaking, listening, reading, writing and viewing?
- Are we partners in our children's learning?

Take a moment to review your children's learning environment and decide whether you are supporting their need to navigate the 21st century easily, by mastering competent, effective communication skills.

Take a moment to listen

Take a moment to listen today
To what your children are trying to say.
Listen today, whatever you do
Or they won't be there to listen to you.

Listen to their problems,
Listen to their needs,
Praise their smallest triumph,
Praise their smallest deeds.
Tolerate their chatter,
Amplify their laughter,
Find out what's the matter,
Find out what they're after.

But tell them that you love them, every single night
And even though you scold them, be sure you hold them tight.
Tell them everything's alright,
Tomorrow's looking bright.

Take a moment to listen today
To what your children are trying to say.
Listen today, whatever you do
And they will come back, to listen to you.

Anonymous

The Helper

Do you ...

- Make the activity seem easier by changing the child's method to one that you consider simpler?
- Attempt control of the game?
- Assume the child cannot complete the activity without your help?
- Give the child little chance to communicate?

The Mover

Do you ...

- Talk at the child not with him / her?
- Keep the activity moving, aim for speed as though you don't have much time?
- Look at your watch?
- Attempt control of the activity?

The Teacher

Do you ...

- Attempt complete control of the activity?
- Allow the activity to progress only in the way you consider to be correct?
- Prevent the child from playing with the toy how they choose?
- Direct?
- Do most of the talking?

The Responsive Partner

Do you ...

- Encourage?
- Allow the child to lead?
- Adapt the activity to share the moment?
- Add language and experience to the activity?
- Encourage the child to communicate in whatever way he / she is able?

Julia Gabriel CENTRE FOR LEARNING

Express your best self

REMEMBER

The first step in helping your child learn is to become aware of how you relate to talk to your child. How do you respond? What kind of partner are you?



The **TEACHER** partner — who does most of the talking and forgets that children learn best by doing rather than by watching or forcing. You must **reach** your child so that you can **teach**



The **RESPONSIVE** partner — who encourages communication by following the child's initiations with sensitive,