

# Communication Helps Parents Resolve Conflict

by Robert Ozwoeld

**Few** parents would deny that raising children is challenging. Some would go so far as to say difficult, or even stressful. Most would probably agree that it helps to have a partner with whom to share the process. However, sharing responsibility with a partner can also complicate matters, because partners may not always agree on how to handle things.

Minor disagreements between partners need to be resolved in order for both partners to work together in a coherent parenting strategy. These minor disagreements can be easily resolved if partners have good communication skills. Unfortunately, they often do not.

Effective communication requires an attitude of mutual respect and a spirit of cooperation. One simple way of showing respect is to be polite, something we tend to do more easily with strangers and acquaintances than with our loved ones. With strangers and acquaintances, even when we feel hurt or angry, we tend to control our feelings and behave in socially acceptable ways. But with our families we tend not to hold anything back, lashing out in anger without hesitation.

This old adage about only hurting the ones you love sometimes rings true. But it is possible to treat family members with respect, even when we are feeling angry. It requires a conscious effort to control our feelings and tell ourselves to “be nice.” We can do this even if others around us are not being very nice.

If you respond to your partner’s anger or disrespect with anger or disrespect of your own, this will surely lead to escalation of bad feelings, which will, in turn, lead to arguments, power struggles, and desires to get even. Effective communication is much more likely to result if you can respond to disrespect in a non-defensive manner, remaining calm when your partner is not. Hopefully, when your partner sees that you are calm, that will have a calming effect on him or her, and an argument may be avoided.

Being polite and respectful may solve some communication problems but not all of them. Clarity may often be a problem, too. When we try to communicate with someone, sometimes the messages get through and sometimes they do not. One reason for messages not getting through is that they may be distorted by non-verbal aspects of communication. Posture, tone of voice, gestures, and other forms of body language may complicate or even contradict the message that is contained in the words we use, whether we are aware of it or not. Thus the message received by the other person may not be quite the same as the message we intended to send, resulting in miscommunication and/or confusion.

Some messages get distorted because we make assumptions about what other people meant. We believe that we understand what they meant, and we assume our understandings to be correct and accurate. Unfortunately, our understandings are often incorrect or inaccurate, and yet we attribute certain thoughts, feelings, or motives to our partners, based on these faulty assumptions. In a sense, we engage in a form of mind reading, assuming we know our partners’ intent, instead of checking with them to find out what they really meant.

Communication can easily be derailed by mind reading if our assumptions are inaccurate. Since we are usually unaware of our attempts at mind reading, and since interactions between partners happen very quickly, it is conceivable that we may end up arguing about something that we actually agree on.

Habitual mind reading may result in unwarranted conclusions, inaccurate predictions, unrealistic expectations, self-defeating attitudes, and unnecessary upsets. We may be accurate some of the time, but more often than not, we are not accurate in our mind reading. No matter how strongly we believe we are right, there still is a strong possibility that we are wrong. We would be on more stable ground if we checked out our assumptions and interpretations with our partners. We can come across as much more reasonable and cooperative if only we assume a more tentative stance about the conclusions we draw from our interactions with our partners.

There are a couple of relatively simple techniques we can use to make our communications more effective. First, we can try to be very clear about the messages we send, being appropriately assertive, and making requests in a non-demanding way. Second, we can make sure we have understood the message the way it was intended by our partners.

These techniques are variously known as active listening, reflective listening, or mirroring. Essentially, this approach requires that the sender express an idea, such as “I would appreciate it if you would call me, if you are going to be late, so I won’t worry about you.” This is done in a non-judgmental, non-blaming, non-attacking manner. The listener then reflects back, “I understood you to say that you would appreciate it if I’d call you when I’m going to be late, so you won’t worry about me. Is that right?” Then the sender verifies that the message was received accurately, or if not, corrects any misunderstandings.

This back and forth process helps to keep communication on track. The listener clarifies the message and the speaker’s intended meaning before formulating a reply. In other words, your first task as a good listener is to focus completely on understanding your partner’s message, rather than focusing on your response. As the speaker, you do not assume that your partner knows what is going on in your mind, what you did today, how you feel, what you are worried about, or what your plans are. You take responsibility for communicating these things directly to your partner.

After the speaker has verified that the listener has received the message accurately, you as the listener then validate your partner’s feelings by saying something like, “If I try to put myself in your shoes, I can understand that you might feel that way.” This does not imply agreement. It only means that you can see things the same way your partner does at the moment, and that it makes sense that he or she feels that way. You are not saying that your partner is right and you are wrong. You are merely acknowledging that his or her feelings are valid and reasonable, when considered from his or her perspective.

It is especially difficult to do this type of active or reflective listening when you are feeling hurt or slighted in some way. At times like these it is very easy to slip back into old habits, responding defensively, engaging in power struggles and arguments. The best way to try to prevent this from happening is to practice the active listening technique frequently, on everyday matters when you are relatively calm and relaxed. Regular practice will help you to develop this skill, so that it, too, becomes a habit, but a positive habit which facilitates more effective communication, not arguments.

Being an active listener requires that you have an attitude of openness and a spirit of cooperation rather than competition. Effective communication requires two willing partners. Non-verbal behaviors help to convey this willingness, behaviors such as maintaining eye contact with your partner, and responding with facial expressions and gestures that let your partner know that you are tuned in.

Insecurity and fear of rejection may prevent some couples from opening up to each other. But when partners really listen to each other and share their true feelings, intimacy develops. Partners can demonstrate that they care about each other by taking the risk of sharing feelings and giving each other feedback without judging, criticizing, or complaining.

Partners can reassure and empathize with each other, by taking the time to clarify meanings and check the accuracy of their interpretations. In this way, partners can be attentive, accepting, and respectful of each other's feelings. Even though there may be disagreements, you can still affirm what is positive about your partner by communicating acceptance and love. Thus sharing, empathy, and understanding lead to clear and effective communication, which is a prerequisite for resolving conflicts amicably.

Developing your skill in this type of communication will eventually lead to a reduction of stress in your relationship because of the spirit of cooperation and the sense that you are working together to accomplish mutually agreed upon goals. Parenting is challenging enough when you are working together. No one needs to have this task complicated by frequent misunderstandings, disagreements, and power struggles.

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