

## Effective Communication Builds Strong Families

by Jim Slempp

In our fast-lane families, effective communication is sometimes far from automatic. When children stop talking, our parenting suffers.

Conversation is a sign of a healthy relationship. Some children are naturally more outgoing than others, but the overall climate in your home has a great impact on the flow of communication. Is love and personal respect in the air or is the atmosphere thick with anger and accusation?

Destructive patterns to avoid are these:

1. **The drill sergeant approach:** *“Shut your mouth.” “Get over here.” “Because I said so.”*
2. **Threats:** *“You’ll do it if you know what’s good for you.”*
3. **Put downs:** *“The trouble with you is you’re just plain lazy.” “When I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.”*
4. **Sarcasm:** The real message is in the tone, as if in parentheses. *“Nice going.” (You jerk.) “How did I get such a smart (stupid) kid like you?”*

Negative interactions and resorting to shouting when you get to the end of your rope take their toll over time. Forgiveness asked for and received is a key to reversing this effect.

Just keeping track of the number of negative comments you make will tend to decrease them, but the best way to improve communication is to start creating more situations when you and your child can simply enjoy each other.

Effective communication patterns are one of the basic characteristics found in strong families. Such effective patterns are often based on simple practical insights into the dynamics of conversation with children. For example, parents won’t get very far starting conversations with trite questions like, *“What did you do in school today?”* The answer, *“Nothing”* comes too easily. It’s better to be specific: *“Tell me two things you did in school today.”*

To sustain effective communication in your home, keep in mind these mouth-opening principles:

1. **Spend time together.** Talking is worth little unless you’re also doing enjoyable things together.
2. **Talk about what children want.** There are some topics of high interest to middle schoolers: family matters (money, job pressures, parental conflicts, vacations); emotional issues (feeling of deep love and affection); their future (college, career); current events, personal interests (hobbies, sports, friends); parents (stories from parent’s childhood, confessions of weaknesses).

Dinner may be a time when families are regularly together. With a little effort, this can be the high point of the day. Ideas:

1. **Establish conversational guides.** Don’t interrupt, look at the person talking while you listen. No put downs.

2. **Choose a topic of interest to everyone.** For instance, news events of the day or problems in friends' lives can lead to important discussions of values and justice.
3. **Trade questions.** Few children will talk regularly with someone who isn't also a good listener, so make habits of these good listening techniques: listen with your whole body, lean forward and keep eye contact, don't interrupt constantly with questions and comments.

Set a time to listen if you can't right then. Acknowledge feelings; bounce them back to the person with empathetic statements that show you understand, such as *"Sounds like you're pretty angry with John about something."*

None of us is a perfect communicator, but our children will talk with us if we regularly create the right climate of courtesy and respect.

Connection with feelings is a critical aspect of harmonious relationship at home. Too often, we focus on the words and miss entirely the feeling being related. We also disconnect when we're so preoccupied with our own business that we don't have the time to listen.

**A response that connects:**

*"I hate school."*

*"Something must really be upsetting you."*

**A response that disconnects:**

*"I hate school."*

*"Don't use the word 'hate.' Like it or hate it, you have to go."*

We can pick up pointers to help us listen for feelings by paying attention to how radio psychologists do it. If you tune in to one of the radio talk shows featuring such people, you can listen to their callers' problems and discover how these counselors connect with the unidentified person's needs. Common techniques:

1. **Acknowledge the problem with simple words that express care and concern:** *"Really?" "It sounds as if you're really troubled." "I know how hard that is."*
2. **Identify the feeling:** *"That's a real let down (or success, or problem, or bummer)." "It sounds as if you're anxious (or upset, or angry, or thrilled)."*
3. **Restate the problem in the form of a question:** *"She yells at you all the time?"*
4. **Explore, using the person's own ideas to solve the problem by asking what efforts have already been made:** *"What have you done to try to solve this dilemma?"*
5. **Ask if the person would accept advice:** *"Would you want me to offer some ideas to help?"*
6. **Offer the advice if the response is affirmative:** *"Maybe it would help you."*

If we've already established unhealthy listening patterns with our children, we'll have to give up interrupting with immediate solutions and relearn how to listen.

You can try other alternatives when you have problems with your children, like yelling, crying, praying, denying privileges and withdrawing services, or waiting until they grow

older and change or leave. But in the long run, connection has advantages none of these offer.

***Jim Slemp** was principal at Roosevelt Middle School when he wrote this article for the Birth To Three column in The Register-Guard..*