

FAMILY TIMES

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NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY

Communication is the key to healthy family relationships



Ralph, proud father of an energetic 8-year-old daughter, recently graduated from a parenting class offered by New Mexico State University's Strengthening Family Initiative. Through the parenting classes, Ralph learned some important tips about communicating with his daughter.

"The classes were fun, and I had the chance to spend quality time with my daughter. Going to these classes has made my little girl and me closer. I feel like we can open up to each other better. We talk so much easier now, and we don't hold anything back. We even cook and bake together."

What is communication?

Communication is sharing of ideas, thoughts and feelings among people. Communication doesn't have to include words and can be something like a smile or a frown. Even silence communicates. By communicating with their children, you show that you're interested in their lives and that they are important to you.

Why communication in families is important

Communication is essential so that family members respect each other's needs and wants. Without it, they will not know what each other thinks or feels, which can make family life more difficult.

Expressing yourself as part of communication

Sometimes we assume that other people know our needs, feelings and opinions without telling them. But relying on mindreading can lead to feelings of loneliness, disappointment, frustration, resentment or hurt. Examine your feelings. You need to examine how you feel before talking

with someone else. Ask yourself, "What am I really feeling right now?" or "How do I really feel about this issue?" Thinking before you speak will help you understand how you truly feel.

- Share your feelings. State your feelings clearly and honestly and be specific. For example, "I had a discouraging talk with my boss today," says more than, "Today was a terrible day."
- Focus on how something affects you. Sometimes it can be easy to blame or point out what another person has done or said. Remember that the other person's feelings are involved, too. Disrespecting that person—and yourself—leads to communication breakdowns.

Listening as part of communication

Effective communication is not just talking but also listening. By listening well to other people in your family, you encourage them to talk about what's most important in their lives. It's easy to get careless about listening, especially in families. We take it for granted that we know what the other person means or pretend to listen while doing something else.

Listening requires attention. Put aside anything you're doing to indicate you're ready to listen. If you don't have time right away, set up a meeting for later.

Listening requires openness and respect. You may disagree with what's being said, but be willing to listen anyway.

Listening requires both hearing words and sensing feelings. Check your interpretation of what someone is saying by asking questions such as, "Are you saying...?" or "Do you mean...?" Feedback helps the listener know if they've really understood what was said.

Listening is difficult when strong emotions are present. Just being with a family member who is experiencing a tough time lets them know you care. Sometimes a gentle touch or hug shows support when you don't know what to say.

Parents to teens: Let's talk

Teenagers are faced with life-changing choices and the consequences almost every day. The middle school and high school years are the most difficult for teens because they are neither children nor adults. Their bodies are rapidly changing, and they face tremendous emotional swings as well. Many teens are seeking answers to tough questions such as



how they feel about themselves and what they'll do with their lives. Though these years will likely be equally trying for you as a parent, remember that teens still need love, affection, emotional warmth, affirmation and sensitivity to their needs.

Communication is at the heart of intimate human relationships—it is the foundation on which all else is built. Research indicates that the respect parents show for their teen's opinions contributes greatly to the happiness of the home. As always, teens say they want sympathetic understanding, an attentive ear and parents who feel teens have something worthwhile to say.

Important issues for teenagers

- For parents to be honest with them
- To talk with them
- To listen without condemning or judging
- To be treated with respect
- To get support at home, school and in activities
- To get attention and companionship from their parent
- To help them understand their body and emotional changes
- For parents to talk honestly about love, sex and relationships
- To pay attention to them before they get into trouble
- To show teens what good, responsible relationships look like
- To talk about peer pressure, drugs and alcohol

Communication is an on-going process, and families can work together to develop openness between the generations. Communication is one key for harmonious parent-teenager relationships. Why not start communicating with yours today!

What Family Times is about

Welcome to the second issue of *Family Times*! Our goal in this parenting newsletter is to provide information and ideas that will help you better nurture yourself and your child. We believe that nurturing yourself is a very important part of being a good parent.

Family Times is written with many family types and children's ages in mind. Whether you are a single parent, part of a couple, a teen parent, expecting your first child, or have children ready to move out on their own, you will find useful information here.

Each newsletter has a theme that covers issues you face while

raising children. Communication is the theme of this issue. Regular sections in each newsletter cover: nurturing your child while still nurturing yourself, specific life situations such as teen or divorced parenting, raising children of different age groups, activities for you and your child to do together, life skills such as managing credit cards, and nutrition and health news.

"Couples' Corner" offers practical suggestions on relationship issues. Don't miss "Resource Corner," which provides names of books, pamphlets and Web sites on each issue's topic.

"Question & Answer" probes a specific situation, and a 4-H story tells you more about the family-centered opportunities of this organization.

We hope you'll enjoy reading *Family Times* and learn new ways to communicate with others. See you again this fall!

Note: This newsletter takes turns referring to children as "he" or "she" so that both sexes get equal time and space. When we use he or she, we include all children.

Owning what you say

Good things happen between parents and children when they communicate about what's important to them. But sometimes parents need a little guidance to talk with their children. "I-statements" and "you-messages" are communication strategies that just might help.

I-statements and you-messages

I-statements are about me; they focus on what I feel, need or think. They do not place the responsibility on someone else. They make me the center of attention. They focus on me, tell about me, and describe me.

You-messages are about someone else. They are your perceptions of how someone feels or what they think. You-messages make someone else the focus of the attention. The big difference is that messages about someone else are only guesses about how they look, feel, or what they need. Only that person knows for sure if the you message is accurate.

Ownership is the difference between I-statements and you-messages. I-statements convey a person's own feelings, thoughts and needs. Each person is responsible for their feelings. That is, no one can make you feel, think or need something you don't want. Although others can influence your decision, the final say belongs to you and no one else.

When people use I-statements, they take ownership of what they feel, think or need. This is the first step in using I-statements appropriately.

You-messages, on the other hand, cannot express ownership of feelings because no one can own anyone else's feelings, thoughts and needs.

Appropriate I-statements

When you want to send a clear message about yourself, use I-statements. Such statements convey ownership and state your feelings, thoughts or needs. Some examples include: "I am angry because your room is not clean." "I need time to myself in order to unwind."

Unfortunately, people often use I-statements inappropriately to manipulate others. For example: "I'm so upset at what you're doing, I think I might have a heart attack." "I feel a migraine coming on, and it's because you insist on having everything your way."

There's no message about ownership of feelings, a sign that indicates misuse of an I-statement.

Appropriate you-messages

The following are examples of you-messages used appropriately:

To give choices. "Eduardo, you can clean your room now or clean it later. However if it's not finished by 6 p.m., you can't watch TV tonight. It's your choice."

To give praise. "You must feel very proud of how hard you tried."

To request clarification. "You seem to be really angry." "You don't seem to like the movie."

To ask questions. "Are you hungry?"



To reflect feelings, making sure kids are aware of their feelings. "You seem to be feeling very sad." "Tell me about school today."

The formula for communicating with I-statements

The following formula is presented as a guide to help us take responsibility for our feelings. I-statements contain your parts:

- I feel (state feeling)
- when (describe the exact behavior)
- because (reason for your feeling).
- What I want is (describe the exact behavior).

More I-statement examples

"I feel happy when the toys are picked up, because I need to have things tidy to feel good about our home. I want to thank you for being considerate of my need for order."

"I feel very disappointed that you hit your brother. One of our family rules is no hitting. What I want and expect is cooperation in following the family rules and for you to express your anger differently."

Use an I-statement or you-message appropriately with your child. See if there isn't a positive change in the way you communicate.

Q & A: How do I get my preteen to talk? Stick with the positive and keep listening

Question: My preteen will not talk to me! We used to talk all the time, but lately I ask her a question and I get a one-word answer or she walks away in a huff. How can I get her to communicate with me again?

Answer: Parents should keep a few things in mind when trying to communicate with their preteens. Try asking open-ended questions that require more than a one-word answer. For example, say "What was your favorite part of the movie?" instead of "Did you like the movie?"

Remember, it's normal for adolescents to value their privacy. Respect the fact that your adolescent is gaining independence and may not want

to tell you absolutely everything. Parents often fall into the trap of using communication predominantly to give orders or lectures to kids this age. Instead, try giving a compliment or saying something positive. Look for times when your child is more likely to open up: in the car, while eating, or when they first come home from school or an activity. Listening is also a big part of communication. Show your preteen you are interested in what she has to say by putting aside what you are doing to give her your full attention. If you're too busy to talk then, set aside time to talk later. When you show your preteen that you're in-tune with her, the road to better communication will soon be open.

Parenting at a distance

How to share life with your kids when they live apart from you

Many parents find it difficult to communicate with their children when they are apart. Situations such as separation or divorce or extended absences for work or illness make having a healthy parent-child relationship an even bigger challenge. The impact of separation can be devastating to children, and leave parents feeling helpless. Absences are especially difficult during the school year, when children need help with their homework and want their parents to be there for school activities and sports. Regardless of why a parent is away, children still need to know that their parent loves them. Parents will undoubtedly feel their own challenges because of separation from their children. At this point, however, it's important to put the kids first. Especially during times of separation, parents must focus on providing their children with a nurturing environment.

You may be wondering how you're supposed to provide a nurturing environment if you rarely see your kids. Below are some ways to creatively stay connected. They aren't expensive and only require some thought and some heart.

- Call them up and ask how their day went.
- Share your morals and values in a letter or conversation.
- Express your love for them when you do talk.
- Mail your child a postcard, letter, or drawing or send an e-mail.
- Encourage your children to talk to you about their feelings.

- Listen patiently to what your children are expressing and feeling when you talk to them.
- Show your children where you are by marking a map, including some of the fun places you'll go together.
- Give children special objects they can use to remember you while you're gone.
- Send frequent pictures of yourself.
- Record yourself reading a story or singing a favorite song.
- Have the child keep track of time apart by putting an "X" on a calendar for every day you are separated.
- Remember important events. Leave birthday or holiday cards for your child to open, or be sure to leave enough time to mail before the big day.
- Create a photo album of you and your child.
- Keep a journal of your "adventures" every day and give it to your child. Or create a book that explains how special your child is to you.
- Reassure your children that they will continue to be loved and protected even though you aren't there with them.
- Tell your children how important they are to you, over and over again.
- Send them a videotape of you telling them about the day they were born or some other special day.
- Send a care package filled with your child's favorite treats.

Massage: New way to talk

Do you know your baby's first language? It's one you've used since the first day baby was born—touch. And, through the nurturing touch of infant/child massage, you can communicate deep love and respect for your baby in a language they already know.

Massage is done with your heart as well as your hands. Your child needs your loving touch to begin to grow emotionally. Massage promotes relaxation, and parents often report that children sleep better, have easier feeding times and get fewer stomach upsets following a massage.

Ready to try?

Before you begin

Create a special time for massage each day, but be flexible. Some days you may have more time than others. Make sure you feel relaxed enough to put any distractions aside to focus on baby.

Create a space that is comfortable, warm and relaxing. Play some music, lay a soft towel or quilt on the floor for your child to lie on. For newborns, a firm pillow feels more secure, as the support helps reduce their reflexive tendency to startle. Use baby lotion or oil to allow your hands to move smoothly over the skin.

Let's get started

Tell your child that it's massage time. Massage is an interactive communication that flows between you and your child.

During the massage, talk or sing to your child in a soothing, loving manner. Be very aware of your child's feedback, and remain flexible in the following areas:

- Number of strokes—Watch for signs of enjoyment, overstimulation or when it's time to move to a different area of the body.

- Firmness of pressure—Children prefer a gentle yet firm, secure pressure.
- Rhythm of strokes—Imagine calm ocean waves to guide your rhythm.
- Length of time—Watch for baby's cues to tell you what is right.

When it's time to begin, lay your child on his back, telling him again that it's massage time. Pour lotion or oil into your hands and rub your palms together. Start with the legs, then feet and don't forget the toes. (This might be a great time to introduce him to "Three Little Pigs.") Use gentle strokes, long or circular. Move on to the stomach, the chest, the arms and end with the hands.

Turn him over onto his stomach. Be sure to talk to your baby since he cannot see you when he's on his tummy. Begin with the back, avoiding direct pressure on the spine, then the bottom, down the legs and to the ankles.

Turn him over, and end the massage with his face. Start at the forehead, then the eyebrows, down the sides of the nose, above and under lips, and finally over the ears and under his chin. Kisses, caresses, cuddles and hugs are welcome additions to any baby massage.



Couples' Corner



Learning to listen to each other

Listening to your partner shows that you care and that you think the other person is important. Listening takes some time and means you really have to understand what the other person is saying. Maybe you have never been taught how to listen to someone else. Learning how to listen is easy. You must look at the other person, concentrate or think about what is being said, and repeat it. This shows that you heard what the person meant to say. This shows you care enough to listen to what your partner is saying.

A good way to remember how to listen is: Look, Think, and Repeat. For example, when your partner says, "Work was really hard today," what is he/she saying? How can you show you are listening? Look, think, repeat.

First, look into your partner's eyes to show you are listening. Next, think about what your partner is saying. Work was really hard today might mean a lot of different things. It might mean someone at work was making it hard to get work done or someone was angry or that your partner was too tired to get work done.

Pick one, pick what you think it means and repeat it. Say, "Work was hard today because you were tired." Even if you are not right about what your partner said, you tried. Your partner will either agree with what you heard or tell you something different like, "I was angry because the supervisor made us re-do what we did last week."

Learning to listen to your partner is one of the best ways to keep your relationship strong and happy. Look, think, repeat to show you're listening. Your partner will feel special when you take the time to listen to what he/she is saying and return that feeling by listening to you.

Simple ways to ensure the happiness of the family meal



For many families, eating dinner together is a lost art. According to recent surveys, less than one-half of U.S. families sit down to a meal together on a regular basis. Typically, everyone grabs something to eat on their way to band or football practice, a soccer game, a play rehearsal or when coming home late from work or the gym. What's dinnertime like in your home?

The importance of this event cannot be underestimated. The evening meal is a key time for families to reconnect, share the day's events, and continue deepening their knowledge of each other. Simply put, making time to eat dinner

together is very important. And, because of the pace of modern life, a shared meal is even more important.

Reminders about mealtimes

- If you are too busy for a family meal, you may be too busy. Keep things simple. Plan ahead for a quick meal and be flexible if adjustments are needed at the last minute. It's worth it to get everyone together.
- Turn off the TV. A blaring television is distracting and discourages conversation. If you normally watch TV during dinner, decrease the habit slowly by having one or two TV-free meals every week. When your kids see you follow through, they'll begin to understand that dinnertime is important.
- Don't slave over the stove. Elaborate meals are not a key ingredient for family fellowship.
- Involve the kids. Have your children help plan, prepare, and serve meals. This builds teamwork and cooperation. Give children "joy" jobs such as setting the table, reading recipes, mixing and stirring food, and clearing the table.
- Show, don't tell. When you make nurturing family mealtimes a priority, your kids will notice and, someday, understand the benefits.

Communicating with your future boss: Winning plans for a job interview

A job interview is your opportunity to communicate to an employer why you are the best person for a job. It's also your chance to find out if your prospective office is a place where you'd like to work. It's very important to make a good first impression, so you'll want to be prepared.

Before the interview, find out as much as you can about the company so that you can talk about the kind of work they do and ask good questions. You can do your research at the library or on the Internet. Plan answers to questions such as the kind of work you did at your previous job,

your skills, and your plans for the future. Dress neatly and arrive on time.

During the interview, try to relax and be yourself. Listen carefully to questions and answer completely. If you don't know an answer, it's okay to say so. Respond politely but be sure to stress your best qualities. Ask questions about what type of work you'd be doing, and when you may expect to hear about the job. After the interview, send a follow up or thank you note—a great way to communicate your interest in the job. Send your note right away, which will impress your potential employer. Good luck!

4-H: Encouraging children to communicate



Good communication is important. It can help you and your children do well in work and school. Families who communicate get along better. There are many ways to communicate. One way to better communicate with your children is to spend more time with them.

4-H is a group that helps families do things together. 4-H teaches us how to communicate better. Any child ages 5-19 can be a member of 4-H. Adults can volunteer their time to work

with 4-H as leaders. 4-H has lots of projects that families can do together.

4-H helps youth members learn to speak in public. Members can also learn to communicate through writing. In 4-H, members and adult leaders learn to work well with others. Members and leaders become part of a team. Being part of the team means members communicate with other children and adults in their area.

4-H has over 200 projects to choose from. Some projects are model rockets, baking, sewing, insects, and art & crafts. You can learn more about 4-H on our website at <http://cahe.nmsu.edu/4h>. You can get on the Internet at local libraries and schools.

4-H has community clubs in each county. You can call your local County Extension Office to find out how to join. There is a list of County Extension agents and their phone numbers below.



Resource Corner

Books for parents

Grounded for Life?! Stop Blowing Your Fuse and Start Communicating with Your Teenager, by Louise Felton Tracy, M.S., Parenting Press, 1994.
How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk: 20th Anniversary Edition, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, Avon Books, 1999.
Staying Connected to Your Teenager: How to Keep Them Talking to You and How to Hear What They're Really Saying, by Michael Riera, Ph.D., Perseus Publishing, 2003.
We Can Work It Out: How to Solve Conflicts, Save Your Marriage, and Strengthen Your Love for Each Other, by Clifford Notarius and Howard J. Markman, The Berkley Publishing Group, 1993.
Your Child, edited by David B. Pruitt, M.D., Harper Resource, 1998.

Books for children

BIRTH TO 3

The Runaway Bunny, by Margaret Wise, Brown Harper Festival, 1991.
Our Dog, by Helen Oxenbury, Penguin Group, 1984.
Kiss It Better, by Hiawyn Oram, Dutton Children's Books, 2000.

AGES 4 TO 8

A Friend for Growl Bear, by Margot Austin, HarperCollins, 1999.
Arthur and the Poetry Contest, by Marc Brown, Little Brown & Company, 1999.
You Hold Me and I'll Hold You, by Jo Carson, Orchard Books, 1992.

AGES 9 TO 12

Tangerine, by Edward Bloor, Scholastic, 1997.
Too Old for This, Too Young for That! Your Survival Guide for the Middle-School Years, for ages 10-14, by Harriet S. Mosatche, Ph.D., Karen Unger, M.A., Free Spirit Publishing, 2000.

TEENS

The River Between Us, by Richard Peck, Dial Books, 2003.

WEB SITES

<http://www.talklisten.org> (This web site has sections for parents and teens on a variety of topics including communication, warning signs, statistics and resources)
<http://www.iparenting.com> (Most of the material focuses on pregnancy and parenting of young children, but there are sections for parents of pre-teens and teens)

FAMILY TIMES

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Contact our county Extension offices about local parenting and nutrition education programs.

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|-------------|---------------------------------|---------------|---|-------------|-------------------------|----------------|
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| Albuquerque | 1510 Menaul NW | 243-1386 | • | Los Ojos | 72 State Road 162 | 588-7423 |
| Aztec | 213-A S. Oliver | 334-9496 | • | Lovington | 100 N. Main, Suite 10-C | 396-2819 |
| Bernalillo | 811 Camino del Pueblo | 867-2582/2951 | • | Mora | County Courthouse | 387-2856 |
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