



14 TIPS

FOR IMPROVING FAMILY COMMUNICATION

Families are busier than ever and one thing they often struggle with is effective communication. When a family describes a situation where they feel “stuck” or as though they tend to face the same problems on a frequent basis, improving the family’s communication skills can be very helpful.

Having **effective communication** between family members not only **reduces negative interactions** but also allows them to **solve problems** in a productive way. Communicating effectively helps family members tackle

one problem at a time as they arise and prevents them from piling up and causing negative interactions between family members. Positive communication also helps every family member feel valued and understood.

Using productive, respectful communication models these skills for children to help them become more effective communicators and problem-solvers. Below are some basic communication guidelines for listening and talking to each other.

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COUNSELOR CORNER

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Q: How can I communicate better with my spouse/partner?

A: Communication is key to any healthy, strong relationship. Unfortunately, communicating with a partner isn’t always easy, but there are skills you can learn to have healthier conversations and strengthen your relationship.

Use these 8 tips to communicate better with your partner:

- 1. Set aside time.** Scheduling time to communicate gives you a chance to make sure you’re in a comfortable environment. Keep things neutral; for example, don’t talk about a high-stress topic in a place like bed or a confined space.

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- **Listen carefully** to others' points of view and ask questions to make sure you understand their concerns to avoid "mind reading" (i.e., saying you know what other people think)

- **Use active listening techniques** such as having good eye contact, leaning forward, and nodding.

- **Avoid looking away**, using the silent treatment, crossing your arms, etc.

- **Let each person** completely state his or her thought without interruption

- **Give feedback** by paraphrasing or restating to make sure family members are truly understood by others

- **Use a natural and neutral tone** of voice instead of yelling or talking loudly

- **Use appropriate facial expressions** and avoid scowling, eye-rolling, or using antagonistic facial expressions towards others

- **Use brief statements** of 10-15 words or less to avoid long lectures

- **Use "I statements"** and take responsibility for your own actions

- **Use direct and specific language**, such as "Please talk to your sister in a respectful manner," and avoid vague statements and use of negative questions, such as "Why do you always do that?"

- **Make constructive statements**, such as "Something is bothering me; can we discuss it?"



- **Say what you mean** and be specific and straightforward to avoid sarcasm

- **Stay on one topic** and focus on the here and now to avoid bringing up old issues or past behaviors

- **Express feelings to others** appropriately and do not use putdowns or name calling

Poor communication can contribute to frustration, anger, and interferes with true problem-solving. Using effective communication keeps conversations productive and helps everyone move toward a solution without getting stuck in a negative cycle.

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2. Give your full attention. Put away your phone, turn off the TV, and try not to multitask. Giving your full attention allows you to hear your partner's words, see their body language, and better understand them. It also shows your partner that you are engaged in your conversation.

3. Don't expect a mind-reader. Sometimes it is easy to assume your partner "should know" what is wrong. This is not a helpful way to communicate. Instead, communicate what is wrong with honesty, to the best of your ability, to try to resolve things before they boil over.

4. Ask open-ended questions. Sometimes it takes time to open up. Having the freedom to answer however you want helps. Give your partner a chance to share their thoughts and emotions at their own pace and in their own way.

5. Use "I" statements. An example of an "I" statement looks like this: "I feel _____ (insert emotion/feeling word such as upset, ignored, disrespected, overwhelmed, etc.) when you do _____ (specific action, statement, or event). Instead, what I need is _____ (specific behavior change, alternative response, or call to action)." Using "I" statements are most helpful when you are as specific as possible, generous to your partner, and willing to acknowledge positive aspects related to the problem.

6. Don't interrupt. Give your partner a chance to finish what they are saying and acknowledge that you are hearing them by summarizing what you heard.

7. Reflect back what your partner has said. Check in with your partner that you understand what you've heard them say, including acknowledging their feelings. Start this with words like, "What I hear you saying is ..." or "Help me understand if I'm wrong, but I think you are saying ..."

8. Notice and say out loud what you appreciate about your partner. You can create a better atmosphere by taking time to notice what you genuinely appreciate about your partner and saying that aloud to them. Be specific. Look for the things about your partner that you appreciate, and then share it! This helps shift the focus in your relationship to the positive, and it helps your partner feel valued.

An outside, fresh perspective from a counselor can help you create more effective communication in your relationships. Call **1-800-627-8220** and say you would like to access your Village EAP benefit.