

## How to Communicate More Effectively with the Youth

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When working with youth, adults often feel a lack of communication with the child or teen. But why is this the case? And who is to blame - the adult or the child? How can adults effectively communicate with youth in a way that makes them feel their efforts are not in vain? When communicating with youth, communication styles and behavior should be age-appropriate (Gable, 2003). When establishing effective communication with youth, it is essential that adults use language that youth understand so they can grasp the message that adults intend to convey. Promotive parenting includes strategies that support children's abilities and interests. Indicators of promotive parenting are, maternal behavioral control, parent-child trusting relationships and communication (Williams-Wheeler, 2011).

Extension specialist Sara Gable (2003) offers advice about this. Gable suggests that when speaking with preschoolers, ages three to six years, the most effective approach for communicating is an investigative approach to help the children recall information. Gable suggests questioning children this age about past events that might help the children develop images that relate to the conversation. During the time of questioning, the adult should listen carefully to the child's responses and offer descriptive words to enhance their descriptions. This approach encourages the child to talk about both positive and negative feelings.

Gable suggests that youth between the ages of six to twelve year can process more pieces of information at a given time. When communicating with this age group, the conversation should focus on ideas that can help the youth manage peer pressure and

learn how to manage conflict. Peer relationships are very important at this age. When disciplining the six to twelve-year-old youth, adults should provide calm explanations about the rules and guidelines to help the youth develop awareness about their behavior. As an example, a teacher might provide an explanation such as "Josh if you don't keep your feet on the floor, then you will have to sit on the bench during recess." The purpose of providing explanations is to inform the child about the consequences for the undesirable behavior.

Gable suggests that adolescents between the ages of 12 to 18 are more independent and less engaged with adults. Adolescents at this age tend to focus on their relationships with others outside the family. They are inquisitive about who they are becoming and what others think about them. This is a time in their life when issues such as self-esteem, confidence, and acceptance begin to flow through their minds. Studies have shown that more immediate and frequent communication within close relationships at this age results in decreased feelings of loneliness (Gentzler, Oberhauser, Westerman, & Nadorff, 2011).

With this age group, sensitivity and responsiveness to youth needs are necessary. Although these youth desire independence, they still benefit from consistent adult support (Gable, 2003). It is very important when working with adolescents at this age to be open-minded and willing to understand as much as possible. If the adolescents' ideas don't result in harm to themselves or others, then adults should be open-minded about them.

Communication barriers can result in negative dialogue between adults and youth. Just as there are ways to encourage positive communication between parents and children, there are also techniques that detract from positive communication. Goh (2007)

suggests that the following approaches should be avoided when communicating with youth.

(A) Ordering - Telling the youth what she or he should do. For example,

"Stop complaining that your teacher gave you a failing grade. Go into school tomorrow and talk to her about it."

(B) Threatening - Telling the youth to do something, "or else . . ." -

suggesting there's only one acceptable course of action. For example, "If you don't take your studies more seriously, we're not going to go out and have fun anymore."

(C) Preaching - Telling the youth how to act or behave - usually has a

moralistic, 'this is the right thing to do' tone. For example, "You shouldn't talk about other people like that."

(D) Avoiding - Trying to avoid problems or uncomfortable situations in

the hope that they may go away on their own. For example, "Oh, let's not talk about that. It's so depressing! Let's try to find something happy to think about."

(E) Pacifying - Trying to make the youth feel better without really

addressing the problem. For example: if the youth says, "I feel bad because I was really mean to my little sister!" You reply, "Oh, don't worry about it, I did the same thing many times." Even though you may be sincere, you haven't helped the youth resolve the issue.

(F) Lecturing – Offering the youth unsolicited advise. For example, "If

you want to get ahead in life you must really go to college. You

should really work harder in school so that you can get into college."

Adults who communicate with youth using the approaches above may not understand the negative effects that can result with a tendency to lead to barriers in communication . It is important for adults to recognize and acknowledge factors that they may contribute to the problem in order to resolve the issue. This approach offers potential for better communication with agreeable resolutions between the adult and the youth. Studies show that children who perceive open and satisfying communication processes within the family are less likely to engage in risky health behaviors (Williams- Wheeler 2011).

Communication is key. Without effective communication, it is difficult for parents and their children to maintain a positive relationship. In order to establish a more successful interaction with their children, parents should develop strategies that include recognizing and trying to understand their child's point of view. Likewise, the youth should show respect for their parents' efforts.

### **Additional Resources:**

For additional information about communicating with youth, please visit the following websites:

<http://www.pta.org/2617.htm>  
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

References:

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