

# parenting matters

## Talking With Children



By Emily S. Lavine, LICSW

We all know how exciting it is to hear a child's first words. Verbal communication! The sharing of thoughts, ideas and needs! How wonderful! It IS wonderful...and at times a challenge. The process of listening to and talking with children can sometimes be frustrating and unproductive, creating obstacles within the relationship between caregivers and children. How does the process of communicating with a child become complex and difficult? The primary reason is that adults often forget or misunderstand how children receive and process messages. Pairing that causative factor along with the reality that all people have distinct learning styles and differences, it is not hard to imagine the ample opportunities for ineffective communication between adults and children. In this article, I will outline different strategies for strengthening communication and dialogue

with children.

**Use simple body language to show that you are listening.** Make eye contact with the child, kneel if appropriate, and pause if you were focused on another task. Of course, if you are unable to stop what you are doing, say to the child, "I really want to listen to you. I need five minutes to finish this, and then I can give you my full attention," and keep that commitment.

**Repeat or re-state what the child says.** It is quite helpful to repeat back to the child what she/he has said to you. This not only clarifies content (do I "get" what is being said in this moment?), it also provides concrete evidence for the child that you were listening and that you really care to understand. For example, "You are really ticked off that the coach did not put you in to play for more time." Sometimes, that simple re-statement is the catalyst for the child to volunteer a more detailed explanation of her/his experience and feelings.

**Ask questions to gather more information.** Asking specific open-ended (not "yes" or "no") questions about what the child is describing helps to clarify the situation, sometimes for the both of you. For instance, the child opens up a dialogue with, "I hate John, he's a jerk." You might say, "What happened today between you and John?" If appropriate, continue with follow-up questions. Remember, the purpose is to gather more information, not to judge the situation or problem-solve for the child

**Try to see the situation as your child sees and feels it.** Authentic empathy goes far

in all communication, and the adult – child communication is no exception. Do not make statements to the child that discount or trivialize his/her feelings, such as, "Oh, you don't really mean that," or, "That's absurd, c'mon." The goal is to listen and to connect. Acknowledging the child's feelings, "Ah, now I understand," is a strong message to the child that you DO care and DO understand, advancing the communication process.

**Do not contradict the child's statements immediately.** The adult's tendency is to correct an incorrect statement straight away before engaging in a dialogue. For a child, that can be experienced as an empathic failure and as a judgment. The child says to you, "I am NOT going to gymnastics ever again!" Resist the urge to say, "Oh yes you are! We have already paid for those lessons!" Instead, ask, "What's the toughest thing about going to gymnastics?" The second response to the child produces an atmosphere of open communication rather than an atmosphere of anger and misunderstanding.

**Pause and think, and pause again.** Take at least a few moments to think about what the child is asking, even if you know the answer will be "No." Getting in the habit of pausing and contemplating helps prevent snap answers and snap judgments. Also, it helps the child feel heard, which, even when the final answer is a "No," can help diminish the chances of a power struggle. Sharing your thought process out loud with the child is beneficial for a couple reasons. First, the child experiences by example a reasoning and thought process involved in

making a decision. Second, in hearing the adult's dilemma regarding the child's request, the child may be able to offer possible alternatives or compromises. Seriously consider being flexible when possible. You teach children to be problem-solvers and open-minded thinkers.

These are just a few of the positive strategies that enhance communication with children. Actually, these strategies are applicable to other relationships as well – try them at work or with your partner. Empathic, thoughtful and clear conversation is essential to productive and peaceful relationships.

Emily S. Lavine, LICSW is the Assistant Director of Family and Human Services for the Town of Lexington. Please call the Human Services Department at 781-861-0194 for parent coaching and consultation as needed.

### References and recommended reading:

- *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber
- *Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child* by John Gottman
- *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Lives of Boys* by Michael Thompson

## resource guide

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LEXINGTON RECREATION  
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LexPRESS:  
**Gail Wagner**  
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MUNROE CENTER FOR  
THE ARTS  
781-862-6040

HOTLINE NUMBERS

Edinburg Center  
Psychiatric Crisis Services  
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