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# YOUNG CHILDREN: COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Through guidance and discipline, we teach our children the rules of life. Our goal should be for them to learn to control their own behavior. Positive communication can lay the groundwork for this learning. Communication involves speaking, listening, facial expression, tone of voice and body language. Your child will look to you as a role model as he or she learns to use good communication.

## Things to Keep in Mind When Communicating with Young Children:

- Put suggestions or directions in a positive rather than negative form. Instead of saying, "don't jump on the bed," start with "you need to keep your feet on the floor." You may want to add a reason. "Beds are for sleeping" or "jumping is dangerous." Too often adults assume the child knows what he or she is supposed to do. It is our job to tell children what correct behavior is.
- Minimize the "no's." The more a child hears "no" the less likely he or she will respond to it. Count the number of times you tell your child "no" or start a sentence with "no." You may be surprised at what a strong habit this becomes. Save "no" for the important things and use "yes" more decisively. If your child asks for a cookie, instead of saying "we'll see" or "well, I don't know," say yes right away, if the answer will eventually be yes. "Sure, you can have a cookie." "Yes, you may." This way, the child doesn't learn to beg, whine, etc. to hear a "yes." If the answer is "no," state it positively. "We need to wait until after lunch. Then we'll have a cookie."
- Body language is important. Get down on the child's level and make eye contact. Use gentle, appropriate touch — hold his or her hands or put an arm around his or her shoulder when you speak.
- The speed, volume and tone of your voice and your facial expressions communicate, too. Talk more slowly and softly. Avoid accusations or sarcastic tones and extreme anger. Gentle, respectful tones and words make him or her more likely to cooperate.
- Verbalize your feelings and your child's feelings: "It makes me angry when you hit your sister." "I know it makes you mad when she pulls your hair."
- Be sure your message is clear. Avoid offering choices you don't intend to give. When you say, "Are you ready to go home?" You have given the child an opportunity to say "no." Instead, say, "It's time to go home now." Watch out for "OKs." When you add this to the end of a sentence, you invite the child to choose. "It's time to pick up toys now, OK?" means the child can decide if it's OK with him or her to pick up toys now.
- Reinforce words with action. "It's bedtime. Let's tiptoe together all the way to your room." "Time to pick up toys. I'll stack the blocks and you put all the animals away."
- Negative communication techniques like criticizing, discouraging, shaming, labeling or comparing do not help a child behave acceptably. "That's a stupid idea." "You're a brat." "Why can't you act like your brother?" "You'll never get it at the rate you're going." These are all examples of negative communication.
- Be sure that rules, limits and directions are stated clearly and simply at a level your child can understand. Make sure he is allowed to make some choices each day.
- Use praise (that's great!) and encouragement (you're trying your best!) to communicate your confidence in your child. Give him or her positive expectations when he or she falls short of the desired behavior. "We'll have to put your bike away for the rest of the day, but I'll bet tomorrow you'll remember to stay away from the street."

When we talk to children, no one uses perfect communication skills all of the time. Our goal should be to continually try to improve interaction with children. Children who grow up in environments with positive, respectful, encouraging communication have a head start in achieving the ultimate goal, which is to discipline themselves.

For more information, contact the Family Life Educators at 605-322-3660 or familylifeeducators@avera.org.

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