

Communicating with Young Children

Peggy O. Harrelson, Extension Specialist, Child Development, Virginia State University

Communicating positively with young children helps them develop confidence, feelings of self-worth, and good relationships with others. It also helps make life with young children more pleasant for children and parents.

Positive communication focuses on respect for the child and involves both speaking and listening. Communication is what we say and how we say it. Positive communication leads to nurturing relationships, cooperation, and feelings of worth. Poor communication can lead to kids who “turn off” adults, conflicts and bickering, and feelings of worthlessness.

Adults sometimes have difficulty communicating positively with children when feelings are involved—either their own or the child’s. There are ways for parents to improve their communication with children.

Get the child’s attention before speaking

Children can only concentrate on one thing at a time. Look directly at the-child and call her name. A touch on the shoulder or taking her hand will help get her attention. Give her time to look at you before you start speaking. (Example: “Sarah.” Wait until she stops playing with the doll and looks at you.)

Communicate on the same level as the child

Communication is more effective if both people are on the same level. Adults need to stoop down to the child’s level or sit beside her. Making eye contact with the child lets her know that she has your attention and is much less intimidating to the child.

Speak as if you mean it

Make important requests firmly. Use a firm tone of voice without sounding angry or pleading. Tell the child what you want her to do and why. Give clear, consistent instructions. Remember your body language.

It should show that you are serious and expect the child to comply.

Say “Please,” “Thank you,” and “You’re welcome” to the child.

Modeling appropriate behavior is one of the best ways to get desired behavior from a child. Children also deserve the common courtesies that we, as adults, expect. Children are more likely to carry out desired behaviors when we add these courtesies. Nagging a child to say “please” or “thank you” sets a bad example. They are more likely to use courtesies if they are not constantly reminded.

Make requests simple

Too many requests are confusing for a young child to remember. Make sure that your requests are short, clear and consistent. Laughing at a behavior one time and reacting angrily another sends the child a contradictory message.

Use more positive direction than negative

Positive communication with children uses more “Do’s” than “Don’ts.” In other words, tell the child what to do rather than what not to do. Children respond much quicker to positive demands than negative ones. Allow children to make choices when possible. They are more likely to show appropriate behavior when they have some control over their actions.

Talk with - not at - children

Adults should communicate with children with the respect and consideration they give their friends. Sometimes, adults spend so much time talking “to” the child that they neglect the listening part of communication. Talking with children lets them know that not only do we have something to tell them, but that we are also willing to listen to what they have to say.

www.ext.vt.edu

Produced by Communications and Marketing, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences,
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2009

Virginia Cooperative Extension programs and employment are open to all, regardless of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, or marital or family status. An equal opportunity/affirmative action employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Virginia State University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating. Mark A. McCann, Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg; Alma C. Hobbs, Administrator, 1890 Extension Program, Virginia State, Petersburg.

Keep lines of communication open by listening attentively when the child talks to you

Encourage the child to talk to you. However, if you are busy, do not pretend to listen. Tell the child, "I'm busy now, but we will talk about it later." Be sure to follow through with the child. Never try to trick children. Answer questions honestly. Share your feelings and ideas but accept the child's fears, ideas and feelings. Never promise the child anything that you cannot deliver. Making an effort to keep our promises to children increases the effectiveness of our communication.

Use kind words and actions to encourage and support the child

Unkind words help to tear a child down and make the child feel bad. Kind, supportive words and actions tell children that they are loved and lead to positive self-esteem. Nurturing words and actions help to develop trusting relationships where problems can be discussed and solved. Remember that affection is also part of effective communication and that comforting a child and sharing smiles and hugs are powerful communication tools.

Tip: Pick a day and record how many times you say "No," "Stop," "Don't," "Quit," or "You know better." Work on your communication skills to replace these words with positive statements.

If you want to know more

Cherry, C. *Parents, Please Don't Sit on Your Kids*. Belmont, CA: David S. Lake, Pub., 1985.

Dinkmeyer, D., McKay, G., and Dinkmeyer, J. *Parenting Young Children*. Circle Pines, MN: AGS, 1989.

Faber, A. and Mazlish, E. *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon Books, 1980.

Latham, G. *The Power of Positive Parenting*, Salt Lake City: Northwest Publishing, Inc., 1994.

Samalin, N. *Love and Anger: The Parental Dilemma*. New York: Penguin Books, USA, Inc., 1991.

Virginia Cooperative Extension. *Winning Ways to Talk with Young Children*. Prepared by Betsy Schenck. Virginia Tech and Virginia State. Publication 350-721, <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/350-721/>