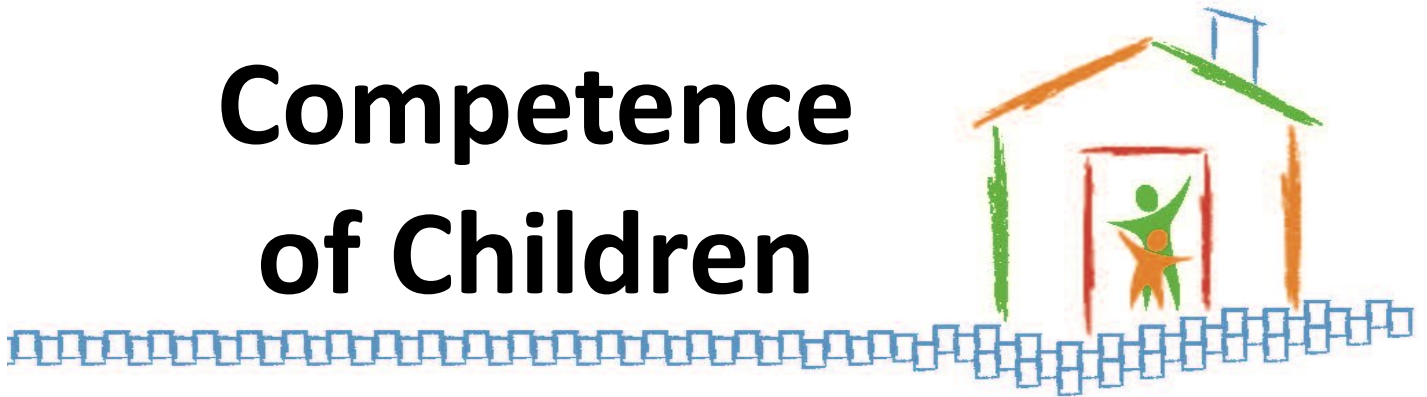


# **Social and Emotional Competence of Children**



## Social and Emotional Competence of Children

*Sometimes children need help expressing their feelings and emotions. Parents and caregivers can help children learn to communicate clearly, recognize and regulate emotions, and build and maintain relationships.*

Social Connections

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

Parent Resilience

Concrete Support in Times of Need

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## Social and Emotional Competence of Children

It is important to understand the importance of:

- Teaching children social skills, such as sharing and being respectful.
- Teaching children emotional skills, such as using words to express feelings and emotions.
- Setting clear, consistent boundaries.
- Providing unconditional support.
- Providing opportunities for children to help around the house/school & engage in the community as they get older.

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## Parenting and Emotions

- **Emotion Dismissing**
  - ▣ Unhappy emotions should go away/be minimized.
  - ▣ "There is no reason to be \_\_\_\_\_" or "Just get over it!" or "Cheer up, it's not that bad"
  - ▣ Discourages children from sharing feelings or trusting their own feelings.
- **Emotion Disapproving**
  - ▣ Emotions are a sign of weakness – Children should be tough.
  - ▣ "You shouldn't feel that way!" or "Don't be a wimp!"

(Based on Emotion Coaching: The Heart of Parenting, John & Julie Gottman, 2013)

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## Emotion Coaching



- A parenting style that promotes positive behavior and health of children. Values all emotions, not all behaviors.
  - ▢ Be aware of children's emotions
  - ▢ Recognize emotions as opportunities (bids) for connection
  - ▢ Help child verbally label emotions
  - ▢ Explore why a child feels a certain emotion
  - ▢ Express empathy and understanding
  - ▢ Help child figure out what to do about the emotions/reaction they are having
  - ▢ Help them learn from their mistakes
  - ▢ Set limits and problem solve

(Based on Emotion Coaching: The Heart of Parenting, John & Julie Gottman, 2013)

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## Emotional Mirror



- Children need caregivers to respond appropriately to their emotions, especially their strong emotions.
- They need an environment where they feel safe expressing their emotions.

"Mirror"  
children's  
emotions



From a mirror kids want an  
image, not a sermon

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## Messages of Love



- There are at least three "languages" of love:
  - ▢ Show Me (e.g. time, gifts, service)
  - ▢ Tell Me
  - ▢ Touch Me
- Parents and caregivers can send a message of love by:
  - ▢ Noticing what children ask for
  - ▢ Noticing how children send messages of love



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## Bids for Connection



- Three ways to respond to bids for connection:
  - ▣ Turning away
  - ▣ Turning against
  - ▣ Turning toward
- Why do children make so many bids?
- Can you think of examples?
- Why is it important to “turn toward” bids for connection?
- What might turning toward children’s bids for connection teach them in their own relationships?



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## Granting in Fantasy What Can't be Granted in Reality



- If wishes can't be granted, grant them in fantasy.
  - ▣ It does not give them what they want, but it gives them the next best thing – knowing you heard them and understand.



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## How do positive responses to children build emotional and social competence?



- Early experiences (positive & negative) impact brain development, including “adverse childhood experiences”

Genes cause brain cells to form connections – but so do **positive interactions** with caregivers – including reading and responding!



- Resilience is possible – secure warm relationships have a protective effect
- Positive attention & stimulation cause new connections to form neural “learning pathways” & strengthens existing ones.

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## Children with Special Needs



- If you have a child with special needs, what do you need from others in order to support his/her social/emotional development?
- If you work with families who have children with special needs, what do you already do to support their social/emotional development?



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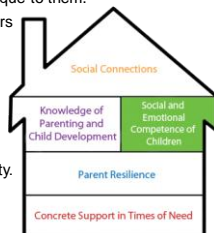
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## Social and Emotional Competence of Children



### Key Principles:

- Parents and caregivers serve as the primary role models for children.
- Children need messages of love that are unique to them.
- Children do best when parents and caregivers turn toward their bids for affection, attention, and connection.
- Children need an environment where they feel safe expressing their emotions.
- Feelings must be dealt with before behavior can be improved.
- Grant in fantasy what you can't grant in reality.
- Parents should model the principles.



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# Strong Parents, Stable Children: *Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families*

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## Social and Emotional Competence of Children

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### *Listen to Kids and Help Them Put Emotions into Words*

Children's experiences during early childhood help set the stage for later health, well-being, and learning. Research shows that just as children's brains and bodies develop so do their emotions and their ability to express themselves. As children learn to tell parents how they feel and what they need, parents become more responsive to children's needs. Parents today have a lot on their plates. Juggling the demands of work, home, and other responsibilities leaves many parents feeling like they do not have nearly enough time with their children. But it is important for parents to remember that even though the *quantity* of time matters, the *quality* of time is also important. Even small acts of kindness, protection, and caring—a hug, a smile, or loving words—make a big difference to children. Sometimes parents need extra support if their children have problems or needs due to age, disability, or other factors. Parents need practical tips and resources to help them promote healthy social and emotional development.

Here are some ways you can help:

- Share information about children's social and emotional skills, including skills they typically do and do not possess at different ages.
- Talk about the importance of feelings when you work with children and parents.
- Help parents learn how to be empathic. Demonstrate how to reflect emotions back to children.
- Provide opportunities for children to express their feelings through drawing, writing, and other activities in addition to helping them express feelings verbally.
- Encourage parents to talk with other parents about how they promote their children's social and emotional development.
- If concerns arise, help parents identify staff or consultants who can talk with them.

Here are some questions you can ask:

- What kinds of daily routines do you have with your child?
- All families have conflict sometimes. What happens when there is conflict in your house?
- How do you keep your child safe at home and in your neighborhood?
- When you spend time with your child what do you like to do together?
- What are your child's greatest gifts and talents?
- How do you encourage these talents?
- What do you do when your child does something great?
- How does your child show affection?
- How does your child act when he/she is frustrated or angry? How does he/she calm down? What do you do to help?

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# Strong Parents, Stable Children: *Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families*

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## Emotional Mirror

Children start to learn about feelings and relationships when they are first born. When parents and caregivers respond in a warm and caring way, it helps children develop good social and emotional skills. These skills help children make friends, talk about feelings in healthy ways, work through conflicts peacefully, be patient, and show empathy when someone is hurt.

Children need to feel safe about sharing how they feel. When they feel safe, they are better at soothing themselves. If they have strong emotions, like fear, anger, sadness, or stress, it is not easy for them to listen or learn.

**To help children, use an “emotional mirror” to reflect their feelings:**

- Notice emotions and help children say how they feel. Do not ignore them. Instead, say things like:
  - “You look angry”*
  - “You are disappointed”*
  - “That is a pretty strong word”*
- Talk about why they feel that way
  - “Can you tell me more about that?”*
  - “Let’s think about another way to look at this.”*
- Help children solve problems so they can manage their feelings next time. If a child is upset or feels a strong emotion, it may be best to simply hold the child so they can cool down until they are ready to talk.

*A child’s feelings should be taken seriously, even though it might not seem like a big deal to others. Children will not act out as much if they feel understood.*

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# Strong Parents, Stable Children: *Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families*

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## Bids for Connection

Children of all ages reach out for attention and affection to build positive bonds with their parents. These actions are called “bids”. Children constantly make bids for connection to their parents and caregivers – for attention, affection, reassurance, and help. How parents and caregivers respond to these bids is important. It affects children’s sense of self and feelings about their parents.

If a parent ignores a child’s bids or says something negative, the child might be less likely to make similar bids in the future. Sometimes misbehavior is a bid for connection, especially if other bids have gone unnoticed or were not successful.

On the other hand, if the parent “turns toward” and shows interest in what the child is saying or doing, this helps strengthen the relationship. Children love when parents watch them perform, try something new, and provide encouragement.

### **Here are some examples of bids:**

Questions: “Guess what I did today?”

Gestures: Reaching out to hold hands and motioning for parents to watch

Facial expressions: Smiling or frowning

Touch: Hugging

### **There are three ways to respond to a person’s bid for connection:**

- Turning away—Ignore bid and continue doing what one was doing
- Turning against—Become frustrated; tell child to go away because you are busy
- Turning toward—Give undivided attention by listening and/or watching (even if you feel like you have watched the same action a thousand times!)

Positive responses to bids for attention and affection send a message that parents care and understand their children. It also helps make children feel good about themselves and the relationship.



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# Strong Parents, Stable Children: *Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families*

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## Granting in Fantasy

Sometimes children want things that parents simply cannot give them. Parents can get caught up trying to reason with children or explaining why something is not possible. Instead of saying “No” over and over again, a better strategy might be to grant in fantasy what you cannot grant in reality.

Here are some examples:

A child is whining because a special toy or blanket was accidentally left at home.

*A parent could try to reason and say something over and over such as:*

“I don’t have your blanket! Stop asking for it! I can’t get it for you!”

*Or a parent could grant in fantasy and say:*

“You really love your blanket. You miss it and you are very sad. You would love to snuggle with it right now. If I could race back to our house in a rocket, I would grab your blanket and zoom back.”

It is a stormy day and your child is complaining about staying inside and being bored.

*A parent could try to reason and say something over and over such as:*

“I told you before, you can go outside later. Now go find something else to do!”

*Or a parent could grant in fantasy and say:*

“Wouldn’t it be fun if we could be playing at the park instead? We could have fun playing catch or seeing how high we can swing.”

A child is hungry and only wants pizza, but someone ate the last slice.

*A parent could try to reason and say something over and over such as:*

“It’s gone. We will have pizza again another day. You have to pick something else to eat or don’t eat anything.”

*Or a parent could grant in fantasy and say:*

“Don’t you wish we lived in a pizza restaurant so you could have pizza all the time? You could walk into the kitchen and have any kind you want every meal!”

Granting in fantasy does not change how things are, but it shows the child you hear and understand and see why they are upset. Turn it into a game and see how imaginative you can be. Often children become so focused on imagining that they do not think about what was upsetting them. Letting children know we understand is very important. A parent may not be able to give what their child wants, but they can offer the next best thing—comfort and compassion.

# Strong Parents, Stable Children: Building Protective Factors to Strengthen Families



## Rethinking the Brain

During the past 40 years, many studies have looked at how children develop, learn, and grow. This research has helped confirm the benefits of language activities like reading, storytelling, and singing. At one time, many thought our development depended mostly on our genetic makeup. Now, researchers recognize that nature (our genes) interacts with how we are nurtured (care, surroundings, stimulation).

Old thinking...	New thinking...
How your brain develops depends on the genes you are born with.	How a brain develops depends on a complex mix between the genes you are born with and your experiences.
Your experiences at a very young age have little impact on later development.	Early experiences have a big impact on the architecture of the brain and adult capacities.
A secure relationship with a primary caregiver creates a great place for early childhood development and learning.	Early interactions don't just create a context, they directly affect the way the brain is wired.
Brain development doesn't vary much; the brain's capacity to learn and change grows steadily as an infant progresses toward adulthood.	Brains continue to develop; there are prime times for learning different kinds of knowledge and skills.
A toddler's brain is much less active than the brain of a college student.	By the time children reach the age of three, their brains are twice as active as those of adults. Activity drops during adolescence.

*How can parents and other caregivers help promote children's positive development?*

Genes cause brain cells to form connections, but so do positive experiences with caregivers! Spend time reading and talking about pictures and stories. When children read and do other activities with caregivers, it not only promotes children's brain development but also their emotional and social development.

Early experiences (both positive and negative) impact brain development. Children can bounce back from difficult experiences, especially if they have secure, warm relationships with caregivers. These relationships have a protective effect that can help children cope with stressors and challenges later in life. Both children's and adult's brains can be rewired through positive experiences and close relationships.

*Adapted from: Making Connections: How Children Learn. A Summary of Recent Brain Research. September 1997.*



## Sending Messages of Love to Children in Their Own Language

Each of us likes to be loved in a little different way. It is true for adults and it is true for children. Even small children have their own ways that they like to be shown love.

We love best when we customize our message of love to the person receiving it. In fact, messages of love are effective only when the person to whom we send the message feels loved, valued, supported, or cared about. We can say, "I love you" to our children all day long, but they will believe us only if they feel loved. To help them feel loved we must discover what is important to each person - or their love language.

We can learn the love languages of the people in our families. Knowing how to best show love does not come automatically. It takes effort. That effort will pay off with closer relationships and more understanding. Family life can actually be more fun!

There are two love languages that seem to work with everyone. They are taking time and being understanding. Taking time means doing things together that both of you enjoy. Being understanding means listening to the feelings that are important to that person. There is a special unit dedicated to each of these languages.

There are some love languages that work very differently with different people. Some people are "tell me" types. They want to be told regularly that they are loved and valued. Some people are "show me" types. They are not convinced by words, they want actions. Some people are "hug me" people. They like to be held or hugged. Each of these languages of love is important enough to have a special unit dedicated to it.

Most people prefer love in some combination of languages. Some people may like a little telling, some hugging, and lots of showing. There are several ways to determine how people prefer to be loved: We can notice how they show love; we can notice what works in showing them love; we can ask them.

Love languages change. Even when you have discovered a family members' preferred way to be loved, your messages have to be adapted for their changing moods and their changing lives. A child who once loved getting a teddy bear may now prefer a T shirt. A partner who usually likes to be told may prefer to be hugged when tired or lonely. Consider languages of love as something you never stop learning. Experiment. Try new ways of showing love to the members of your family.

Don't think of this as extra work; think of this as smarter work. As you learn to show love to family members in the way they prefer, you will feel closer and even work together better. Give it a try!

### Applications:

Discovering languages of love: For each member of your family, consider the following:

Notice: How does that person usually show love toward people?

Think about: What has seemed to work at showing love toward that family member?

Ask: "What are the things people do that best help you feel loved?" or "What can I do that will best show my love for you?"

Experiment: Try sending messages of love and see what works.

You may also be interested in reading the unit, "Learning Languages of Love in Marriage."

# PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Sending  
Messages  
of...



**E**very child (and adult) needs to be reminded often that people love and value him or her. Often we get busy and forget to send messages of love to our children. Or we send messages poorly. Or we send only angry messages.

Sometimes we send a message of love, but the child does not get it. It is as though we are talking different languages. There are at least three "languages" of love: showing, telling, and touching. Consider examples of each.

A child who likes show-me messages of love may want you to do things for her. She may want you to wash the dishes for her, to buy her a gift, to take time with her, to take her for ice cream, or to repair her bike. A tell-me child wants to hear words like: "I love you." "You're important to me." "I love to be with you." A touch-me child may want a parent to hug him, rock him, cuddle him, or hold his hand.



"YOU'RE IMPORTANT TO ME."

That all seems easy enough. But sometimes the message of love does not get through because we don't speak the child's "language." For example, if I send a message of love to my daughter by telling her that I love her but she wants me to take time to fix her bike, she might not get a message of love. She might feel that I don't really care. To make it more complicated, if you have more than one child, each child probably has a different way of getting messages of love.

How can you effectively send a message of love to a child? One way is to notice what your child asks for. Does he want time, attention, a listening ear, materials for a hobby, outings? Another way is to notice how the child sends messages of love to you and others. Does she tell you, hug you, write you notes, clean up the house? Observing these things can help you know how to be more effective at sending messages to a given child.

## You can learn to send the right messages of love to your children.

As you read the following list, think of each of your children and consider whether this method (or something like it) would be effective in sending messages of love. Write your children's names in the blanks to show which messages each child may need to receive.

### Child's name: Ways to send messages of love:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Say, "I love you."
- \_\_\_\_\_ Take a bike ride together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hug the child.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Take a nature walk together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Say, "I sure enjoy being with you."
- \_\_\_\_\_ Make a trip to the library together. Research a topic of interest to the child. Check out books for you to read to him or him to read to you.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Say, "I sure am glad you're my child."
- \_\_\_\_\_ Work on a craft together: sculpt with clay or playdough, build with sticks, sew, draw.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Work on a hobby together: writing, stamp collecting, woodworking.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give the child a back-rub.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sit with the child and talk.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Arm-wrestle, thumb-wrestle, or play a game involving physical exertion. (Be sure the child has a good chance to win!)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Visit a relative or neighbor.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Thank the child for helping (or trying to help). Go to a park and swing together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Build a playhouse with the child, even if it's only a sheet thrown over a table. Then play in the playhouse together.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Have the child help you with grocery shopping.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Have the child sit on your lap or close to you while reading, talking, or watching television.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Give the child an "Eskimo kiss" (rub noses).
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other:

Children often enjoy even jobs that seem like "work" if they provide a special time to be with the parent. For example, a child might feel important if allowed to go grocery shopping with a parent, especially if the child is allowed to help.

As you put your children's names on the ideas above, was one of your children very easy to show love to, while another was very difficult? It's important to find effective ways of showing love to each of your children. The child who is hard to love needs love as much as any child. Be sure to find effective ways to send love to that child also.



## Schedule special times with each child.

Some parents schedule dates or special times with each of their children.

Once a month Nancy would schedule a special time with each of the children. On Andy's day she would take him for a hike because he loves to hike. On Emily's day she would take her shopping and for a malt. On another day she would sew with Sara. For each of the children she scheduled the things that they most liked to do.

6	7	8	9
Andy	Emily	Sara	me
-HIKE	-SHOP	-SEW	

Of course, once a month is not often enough to send a message of love. But it may be a reasonable schedule for special times. You may want to use a calendar to schedule such special times for each child.

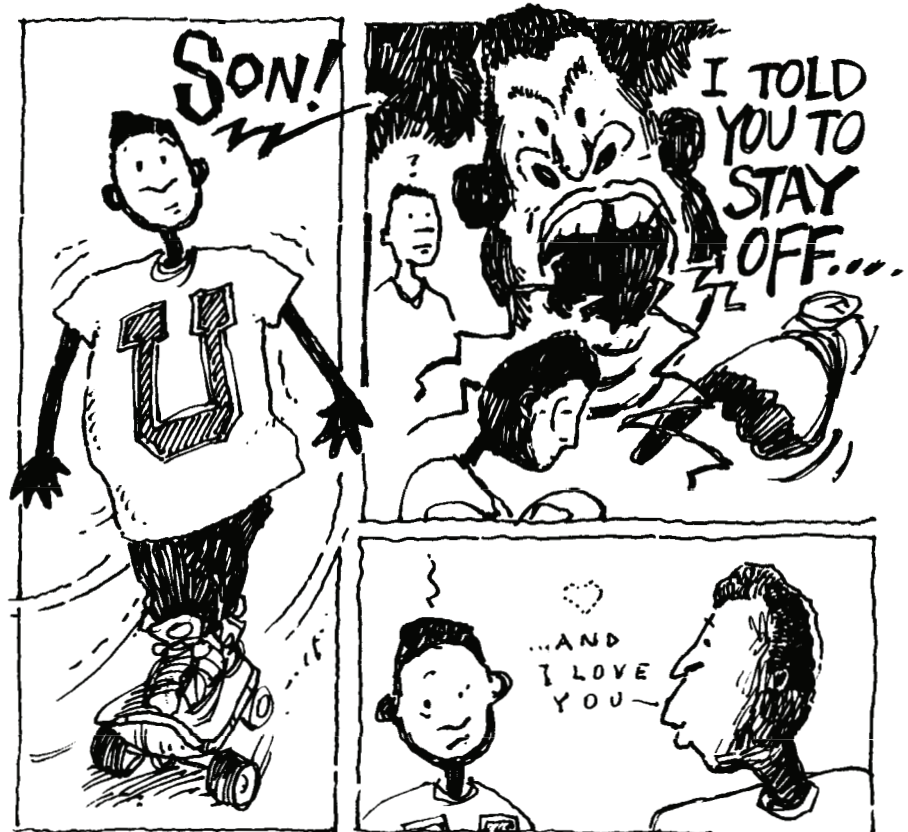
At least once every day we should find some way of sending a message of love to each child. It may include taking a few minutes in the evening to talk with a child about her day. It may mean inviting your son to help you cook dinner. It may be reading a story to your daughter. But every day the message of love should get through to each child.

In any family there are times of conflict. It's not reasonable to believe that there can be no differences, arguments, or fights at home. But while learning to control the problems, we can be sure that the message of love is still getting through.

## Send clear messages.

One of the difficulties of sending messages of love is that we sometimes send mixed messages.

Tom was visiting with me when he saw his son do something that upset him. He marched over to the boy, picked him up, yelled at him, and, when he was finished with the lecture, said, "And I love you." I don't think the boy got a message of love. I think all he heard was his dad's anger.



The dad may have thought he had taught his son about responsibility and still let him know that he loved him. Probably the boy did not learn anything about responsibility but only learned to be afraid of his father. A parent's anger can be so frightening to a child that he does not hear any of the words a parent says.

Another difficulty in sending messages to our children is that our own needs may keep us from seeing our children's needs.

When Andy earned an award, I told him I was so proud of him that I would take him out to dinner. He said he would rather have me help him buy a bike. I realized that I was going to take him to dinner because that's something I like to do, not because it's something Andy likes.

One of the challenges in sending effective messages of love is being aware of what's important to the child. Take a few minutes right now to make a plan of how you will send messages of love to each of your children in the coming week.

Child's name:

How will I send the message:

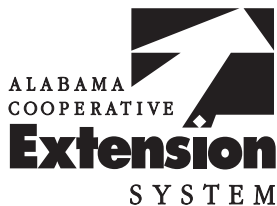


Children want to know that they are loved and valued by their parents. We can be effective at sending messages of love if we learn their "language," send messages regularly, schedule special time with them, and avoid letting anger block our message.

### If you want to learn more . . .

Faber, Adele, and Mazlish, Elaine (1980). *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen And Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon.

Ginott, Haim (1956). *Between Parent And Child*. New York: Avon.



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## Dealing with Tantrums

Tantrums are a real problem, and they are common. When a child starts to yell and scream, what is a parent to do?

Children usually have tantrums because they are tired, frustrated, and don't know how to express their feelings. The good news is that tantrums peak at about two years of age and generally disappear by three years of age. As a child learns to talk and to regulate her own feelings, she is less likely to resort to tantrums.

There is a lot that can be done to prevent tantrums. Don't take your daughter shopping when she missed her nap. Don't drag your son along on errands when he is hungry or bored. If we notice when our children are tired and frustrated, we can prevent many tantrums by not adding extra stress at a time of tiredness, hunger, or frustration. When you do take children along on errands, take things for her to do while she waits for you. If you see a tantrum looming, set aside what you are doing to calm your child. Talk gently. Hug or stroke him. Breathe deeply. Provide something for the child to do.

**Respond calmly to tantrums.** A berserk child does not need a berserk parent. Stay calm. Remove the child from any danger. Sometimes it soothes a child if you calmly stand nearby. When the child gets more settled, a parent might try to give words to the child's frustration: "You really wanted to go out and play, didn't you?" "You are feeling very tired." Recognize that tantrums are a normal way for children to express frustration.

**Give children control when possible.** Children like to have some control in their own lives. Offer them choices. "Would you like milk or orange juice for breakfast?" "Would you like to play with cars or blocks?" "Would you like me to read you a story or sing you a song when I tuck you in?" Children whose preferences are regularly respected, are less likely to get frustrated.

**Don't let tantrums set the rules.** If a parent responds to tantrums by frantically working to appease the child, that child may become a terrorist. Some children, especially after three years of age, throw tantrums because they have learned over time that it is the best way (or the only way) to get their way. We can understand their desire for something without feeling that we must indulge their whim. We can hold to limits while acknowledging their desire: "You really wish we could buy that toy for you."

**Make sure that you are involved in your child's life in many positive ways.** Notice the good things she does. Plan activities with him. Have fun together. A child's frustration is often worsened when there is not a parent available to help the child work through the frustrations of growing up. After a tantrum, do not punish or lecture. Provide the safe and loving environment that helps children grow.

If tantrums continue after the third birthday or become frequent or damaging, talk to your pediatrician.

### **Applications:**

What are the signs you see that one of your children is about to have a tantrum? Are there certain situations or pressures that seem to make them more likely?

What have you found that helps your child calm down instead of escalating to a tantrum? What have you found that helps your child get involved in something else?

What have you done that helps you stay calm when your child has a tantrum? Have you found anything that helps your child settle down after she or he starts a tantrum?

When your child is calm (at least an hour after a tantrum) you may be able to teach a child how to let you know what she is feeling or what he needs. What would work to help your child express him or herself without a tantrum?

## Empathy and Understanding Strengthen Children

Imagine that you have just done something dumb. Maybe you slammed your finger in a door or tripped on a curb. Does it help to have someone point out your error? Would you feel better and smarter if someone said, "You need to pay attention to where you are going!" Would you be glad if your spouse said, "Well, I guess we will need to hold classes for you on walking." No doubt you would feel insulted and angry. The same is true for children. When we state the obvious or emphasize ordinary mistakes, we insult people. This does not result in better performance; it results in damaged relationships. Our usual way of responding to our children's bad ideas and mistakes is to correct them. Haim Ginott, the famous child psychologist, has observed the following:

When a child is in the midst of strong emotions, he cannot listen to anyone. He cannot accept advice or consolation or constructive criticism. He wants us to understand him. He wants us to understand what is going on inside himself at that particular moment. (Ginott, 1965, p. 22)

**There is something very healing when people show understanding and compassion for our pain.** Maybe it is because understanding shows that we care enough to put ourselves in the other's shoes. Maybe it is also because understanding shows respect while advice may feel like criticism. After all, the answers to any problem are usually within the person with the problem, even when that person is a child.

Sometimes we assume that showing understanding will make children think we agree with their view or accept their misbehavior. But understanding really sends a very different message. It tells the child that we care about what happens to him or her: "Your situation is very painful. I feel bad for your pain. I know you want to do things right. I hope my support and love can help you find the peace that will help you solve the problem."

The person with the problems knows the situation, their feelings, their concern and their resources. The best way to help a person in pain is to provide understanding. When we provide understanding, the person is likely to find answers within him or herself.

**Understanding can be like a foreign language.** Most of us did not get very much understanding growing up; most of us are not used to speaking in that way either. Understanding involves observing the child and bringing our own human experience of pain to activate and inform our compassion. So, for instance, if a child tells us about being picked on at school, we might respond with something like one of the following:

"How frustrating."

"I wonder if you felt pretty lonely."

"You wished you had someone to stick up for you."

Many challenges in family life are not solved with understanding alone. We also need to set limits and do problem-solving. See additional units in this series for more information on these subjects. In the exercises that follow this unit there are examples of responses that are understanding and some that are not.

As you get better and better at showing compassionate understanding with your children, they will feel more loved and more confident in their ability to solve problems. And they will feel more love and trust with you.

### Applications:

Place yourself in the position of the person in the situation described in the top left of the box. Consider why the understanding responses are helpful while the less understanding responses might make you feel insulted. In the empty rows at the bottom of the table, you might add other things that you commonly hear (or say) and additional ways that might show understanding.

## Helping Children Learn to Respect Other People

There are some tricks to teaching children to respect people. Parents are tempted to command respect: "You will do as I say." "You will honor your mother." In fact, parents can command compliance, but they cannot command respect. We can make children do what we want them to do (as long as we are more powerful than they are) but we cannot make them respect us or others. Respect is cultivated and earned.

Respect is not earned simply through niceness. There is nothing wrong with being nice, but the parent who tries to "nice" children into doing things is likely to have a difficult child. Earning respect takes more than niceness.

There is another trick to developing respect: Parents are tempted to point out children's mistakes in order to get them to do better. This can backfire. When children feel judged and rejected, they are not motivated to improve. When children are criticized, rather than learn to improve, they are more likely to learn to condemn - themselves or others.

**Children will learn to respect people who show respect to them.** The people who are most likely to be respected use a unique combination of being loving and setting limits in firm but caring ways. (There are many units in this series that provide specific ideas in these areas.) While children do need constructive feedback, it must come within a relationship of love, support, and sensitivity if it is to motivate good behavior. Children also need limits, but they can be established with kindness and respect.

For example, if a child starts to hit his sister, a parent could react (unhelpfully!) with, "What's wrong with you? Stop hitting your sister you barbarian!" That parent could smack the child. That does not teach respect. On the other hand, if a child starts to hit his sister, we could catch the child's hand and say, "We never hurt others. Would you like to tell me what is bothering you?" The wise parent sets limits but does it without attacking or insulting the child.

**Children will learn to respect people when people who are important to them set an example of respect.** Children benefit from seeing us honor people who are examples of values that are important to us. We can regularly express admiration for such people.

It is easy to make fun of people who bother us or are different from us - people from a different country or of a different faith or with different beliefs. Our willingness to show respect for people who are different from us sets an example of respect.

That does not mean that we agree with everything that other people believe and do. "They believe that women must wear veils over their faces. Their views make sense to them. My view is different." It also does not mean that we accept dangerous or illegal behavior.

In order to teach respect, we must be willing to admit our own imperfections. We apologize to a child when we have been unreasonable. We ask for their forgiveness when we have hurt them.

Respect is the basis for strong relationships and it is the natural result when parents use love and guidance.

### **Applications:**

Who are some of the people you most respect? What have they done to earn your respect?

What are some of the ways you show respect to your children? (Do you listen respectfully to the things they say? Do you spend time with them? Do you try to honor their preferences?)

What are one or two ways that you can better show respect to your children?

When people claim to be better than they are, we notice their faults more. When people admit their shortcomings, we are more likely to overlook them - especially when we know they are trying to do better. Do you admit shortcomings to your children and ask for their patience and help? For example, you might say, "When I am tired, I sometimes get mad at you easily and am not as kind as I should be. I am trying to get better. I hope you will be patient with me."

Sometimes a parent is wise to let children know of their difficulties. "I am having a bad day. I hope you will give me a little extra room so that I don't say something that hurts your feelings." But a parent should not burden a child with worry for their well-being. "I expect to be feeling better after I have a few minutes to relax."

# PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

## Raising Good Children: Helping Your Child Become a Moral Adult

Most parents want their children to be kind and caring. We want our children to respect and help people rather than be cruel. We want our children to have inner standards of goodness that can guide them through difficult choices.

People who show concern for others and who make good choices are often said to be moral. Fortunately there are ways to raise your children so that they are more likely to develop into moral adults.

### Be an Example

Your actions send a powerful message to your children about what you think is important. Your willingness to help neighbors can teach your children how to be helpful. Your willingness to participate in church or community efforts to make the community a better place can teach your children how to be involved. Your willingness to apologize when you make mistakes can teach your children how to solve problems and work well with other people.

We have always wondered how to help homeless people. We contribute to charities but we always wondered if we should do more. Early one morning when we were walking along Canal Street on a visit to New Orleans, we spotted three unkempt older men huddled in a doorway for shelter from the rain. It seemed clear that they were poor and homeless. We weren't sure how we could help them but we decided





that we might take them to breakfast. My husband and I approached them and asked if we might take them to a restaurant a few doors away and buy them breakfast. They were very glad for a warm meal and for caring company. As we ate breakfast, they told us about their lives, both the pains and the joys. We felt very blessed by our visit with them. We did not solve all their problems that morning but we did a small thing to make life a little better for three people.

When parents actively seek ways to help other people, their children are likely to learn a powerful lesson. You may choose to share your musical talents with shut-ins. You may visit and talk with people who are lonely. You may offer a ride to a neighbor who has no car. You might volunteer to help at school. We can all find ways to use our talents and resources to make life a little better for others.

There is always a danger that people may be so anxious to help that they become unwise. It is not good to neglect good sense in our efforts to help others. And it is not wise to try to help in ways that do not fit our resources. But our willingness to try to be helpful with others can make a very big difference for children who are learning about how people relate to other people.

**Q: What are some ways you can serve and help in your community?**

## Discipline Children To Help Them Learn

The reason for disciplining children is to help them become strong and caring adults. The best discipline respects children and helps them to learn.

Think for a moment what it must look like to a child to be spanked for hitting his sister. It must be terribly confusing to have someone hit you to teach you not to hit. Spanking children may teach them to be mean.

Showing respect for children's preferences teaches them about sensitivity and consideration. Discipline that sets limits but also helps children find good ways to get their needs met, can help them become moral adults.

One motto that expresses the challenge of parenting is, "My job as a parent is to help my children get what they want in a way that I feel good about." We want to respect children's preferences while still setting limits.

Children are more likely to learn about good behavior when their parents are willing to calmly discuss ideas and rules with them. If parents blame, criticize, and punish their children a lot, the children are likely to become discouraged or angry. If parents do not set limits for their children, the children are likely to become careless about rules.

Children learn best by gentle parental teaching and by parents' wise use of limits and consequences.

You may want to study Extension publication HE-0687, "Something Better Than Punishment," as you think about good ways to raise moral children.

My five-year-old wanted to help me wash the dishes. She likes to be involved. But when she helped me with the dishes, she would often break a cup or a plate. So I asked her if she would like to set up her own dishwashing. She was very excited. We would set a bowl of soapy water and a bowl of clean water on the table and she would wash, rinse, and dry her plastic plates and spoons. She really enjoyed having her own work to do. Of course she splashed water on the table and floor, but it was easy enough to wipe up the spills when she finished. And I was able to wash the family dishes without breakage.



The common problems with discipline seem to be of two kinds: sometimes we are too insensitive to children's wishes and other times we are unwilling to set limits. When we do not listen carefully to children's wishes, we teach them by our example to be insensitive. When we are unwilling to set limits, we teach them that they do not need to respect rules. The solution is to help them have the experiences and opportunities that they want but to use our adult wisdom to set limits.

For example, some families have a rule that children will be at home rather than hanging out on the streets. Some families set a standard that their children will not date until 16 years of age. Setting standards is important.



But it is also important to be sensitive to the children. For example, a family may allow friends to come to their home to play rather than have their children hang out on the street. Teens can be allowed to have friend parties in their home rather than go on dates before they are ready.

There are better ways to teach children than through spanking and punishment. Hurting children may teach them that the world is a cruel place. Any discipline that is insensitive to what children need and want does not teach them about sensitivity and consideration. Discipline that sets limits but helps children find good ways to get their needs met can help them become moral adults.

**Q: How well are you doing at helping your children get what they want in ways that you think are appropriate? Are you using positive, helpful discipline?**

## Help Your Children Learn Compassion

The basis for moral behavior is empathy, compassion, or feeling for other people. Moral people do not like to see other people suffer. There are many things we can do to help our children develop their compassion.

We can read or tell stories to children that illustrate compassion. For example, in the children's book *Miss Tizzy*, an older woman draws neighbor children into both fun and service. When Miss Tizzy becomes ill, the children know what to do. They serve her.

You may also know stories from the lives of your ancestors or heroes that illustrate the blessing of compassion. Reading such books or telling such stories can help children become more compassionate. A short list of children's books that can help you teach com-

passion is provided at the end of this publication.

We can also give children chances to serve with us. When we visit shut-ins or prepare a meal for someone who is bedridden, we might invite our children to help us. Children should not be forced to participate. But if we tell them about the other person and his or her suffering, and if we show how they can be helpful, many children will choose to help.

When I was invited to deliver some money to a struggling family, I invited my family to help. Each member of the family made gifts or cards or prepared treats. We all worked together to do something for the needy family. The gifts and money were all delivered anonymously.

The next week the family wrote a letter of thanks that was published in the local newspaper. Each family member felt very glad to have been a part of the little project.

The way we talk to children when they hurt others can also help children develop compassion. Instead of blaming children who cause the injuries, we might talk to them about the effect of their behavior on other children. "When you push Cedric down he feels very afraid and lonely. We don't want Cedric to feel that way. What can we do to work with Cedric without hurting him or making him feel bad?"



One of the best ways to help children develop compassion is to get them involved in service. Ideally the service should fit their talents, maturity, and interests. Small children can join you in making and delivering cookies or in singing to lonely neighbors. Older children may be able to help you clean or paint an older neighbor's house. Teenagers may want to join Habitat for Humanity or some other community service effort. As we involve children in service and talk with them about suffering and people's efforts to help, our children are more likely to become moral adults we can be proud of.

**Q: What ways can you help you children develop their compassion?**

## Principles and Feelings

Talk with your children about the feelings and principles that guide your life. Children like to be taught rather than lectured. Good stories can be powerful teachers. Perhaps you had a fifth-grade teacher who was especially caring. Tell the children about her and what you appreciated. Perhaps there is a historic figure whom you have patterned your life after. Share with your children stories and lessons from that person's life.

In our family we all want to learn from each other. Every Sunday as we sit down for a leisurely family dinner, we invite every family member to share his or her best experience of the day. Some family members tell about sharing with a good friend. Some may tell about

things they have learned. Some tell about feelings of peace or love or joy. We like to encourage every family member to notice what they are feeling and to share it with family members.

Songs also teach powerful lessons. We can use the time riding in the car (especially with young children) or playing together to sing fun songs about things that we believe in.

Some families establish a tradition of meeting one evening every week to learn and to share. Family members can take turns leading the weekly discussion or lesson. Even young children can be taught to share stories about their heroes. It is also useful if parents teach their children to understand other people, their differences and their qualities.

There are some influences that can deaden people's sensitivities. Violent, abusive, or cruel movies or games can damage human sensitivity. Wise parents will limit children's exposure to experiences that are harsh. But they will also teach children about positive, sensitive, and tender experiences. They will listen to children and encourage them to be aware of their feelings. (See "Being Understanding: A Key to Developing Healthy Children," Extension publication HE-0682.) Sometimes the best parental teaching is done by listening. Teaching children to be in tune with their feelings can help them make compassionate decisions and become moral adults.

Sometimes children learn to be afraid of the bad without

learning to love the good. Try to understand their feelings of fear and anxiety. Parents also need to help their children to be optimistic, happy, and hopeful. Notice how much each of your children feels positive and hopeful. Help them to notice the things they are excited about. Help them to deal with the things they worry about. You may want to watch the movie *Polyanna* with them and talk with them about playing the glad game.

**Q: What are some ways you will talk with your children about the feelings and principles that guide your life?**

## Help Children Experience Loving, Caring Relationships

The most important factor in helping children become moral adults may be the experience of loving, caring, helping relationships. Every child needs someone who is crazy about him or her. It might be a parent or some other relative. It might be a teacher. But every person needs to be loved.

I always loved visiting my grandmother's house. She seemed to love having me around. She listened to me tell about my experiences. And she cooked special treats for me. Grandma is one reason I am a happy adult today.

The best pattern is for a child to have many people in his or her life who enjoy, appreciate, encourage, and celebrate

that child. Of course different children have different preferences for how they want to be loved. (See "Sending Messages of Love," Extension publication HE-0683.) But all children need to feel valued. A wise parent not only finds ways to show love to each child but helps each child have experiences with other adults who are supportive and caring.

**Q: Does each of your children have regular experiences with people who care about them?**

Imagine that some day when your children are grown you will study their lives and you will see people who are caring and considerate, and who make wise and sensitive decisions. You will know that your efforts to encourage moral development have paid off.

**Some children's books to help you teach compassion are:**

*Miss Tizzy* by Libba Moore Gray, published by Simon & Schuster, 1993.

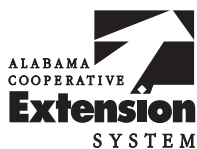
*Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan, published by Morrow Junior Books, 1991.

*Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman, published by Dial Books for Young Readers, 1991.

*Little Polar Bear Finds a Friend* by Hans deBeer, published by North-South Books, 1990.

*Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti, published by Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1985.

For further reading about moral development, you might be interested in *Raising Good Children* by Thomas Lickona, published by Bantam, 1994.



HE-0678

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# PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

## Communication: Building A Strong Bridge Between You And Your Children

Sometimes we think that communication is the same thing as telling someone something. But communication is much more than that. Communication is any sharing of meaning between two (or more) people.

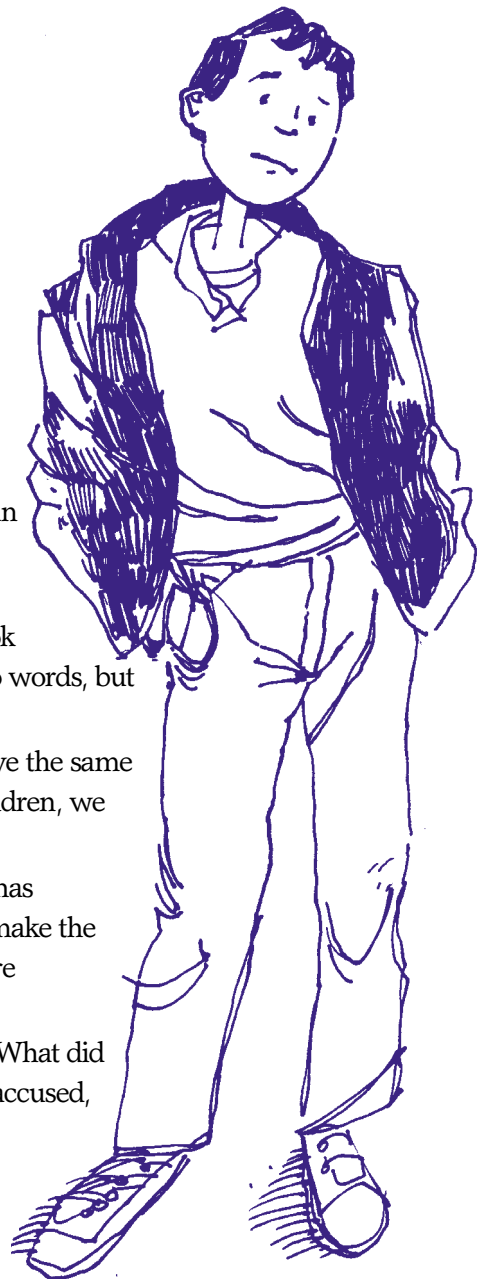
We very often communicate without words, such as when I look threateningly at a child who is about to take a cookie. I may say no words, but the child gets a message.

One of the challenges of communication is that we may not have the same meanings as the people we communicate with. Even with our children, we may have very different meanings.

For example, if your son comes home from school and says he has had trouble with his teacher, you might ask, "What did you do to make the teacher mad?" When we ask that question, we are looking for more information so we can help the child be better behaved.

What do you think is the meaning for the child when we ask, "What did you do to make the teacher mad?" It's possible that the child feels accused, feels that you care more about the teacher than about him, that no one understands him, or that you don't care about his feelings.

So what can you do to communicate better?



## Take time to discover children's meanings.

A very important way to build a relationship with children is to ask questions about their interests, activities, and feelings. The questions should not sound like a policeman trying to get information from them. They should sound like a friend showing interest in them. For example:

"How did your project at school go?"

"What did you enjoy about your visit at your friend's house?"

"Will you tell me about your best experience today?"

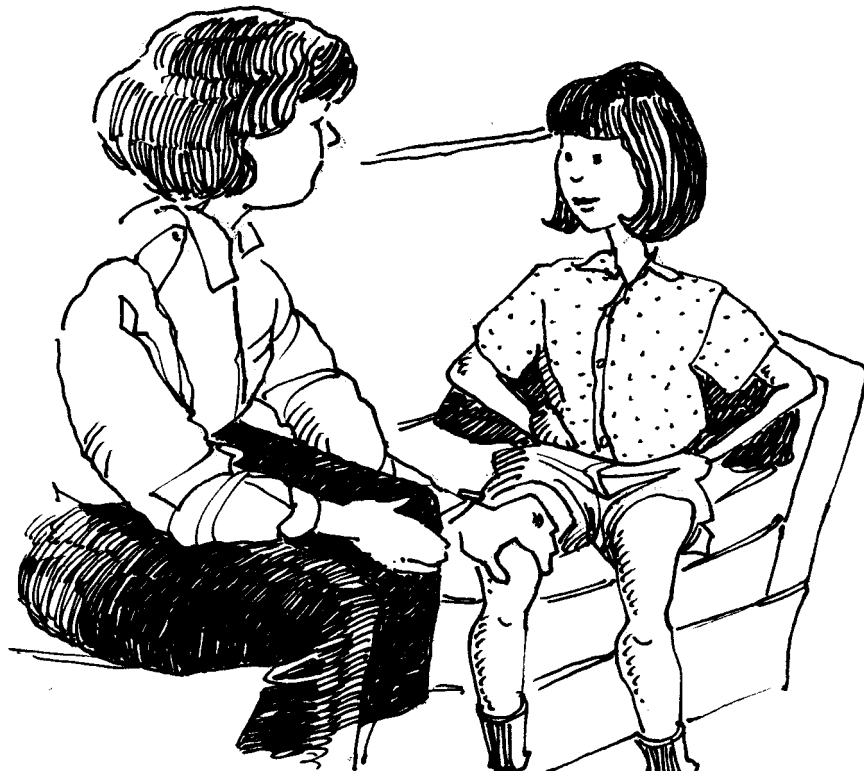
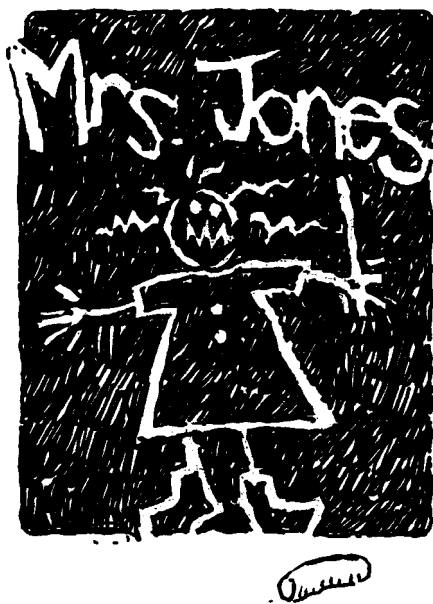
"You seem worried (happy, tired, angry). Will you tell me how you feel?"

One of the most important times to understand children's feelings is when they have strong feelings. If your child has just told you about trouble with his teacher, you might say one of the following:

"How did you feel about what your teacher did?"

"That sounds like it was very embarrassing."

"I wonder if you felt angry."



The first step in effective communication is taking time to understand. Some parents worry that showing understanding to children means that the parent agrees with their behavior. The fact that you understand how your children feel does not necessarily mean that you agree with their behavior. It means that you care about their feelings! That is a very important message. Of course, after you have understood, it's good to find a solution to the problem. You don't need to decide whether the child or the teacher was to blame. Teaching children how to behave is what matters. You can simply ask, "What do you need to do to prevent trouble with your teacher in the future?" If the child has felt safe and understood, then he should be willing to think of ways to prevent future trouble. As a parent you can help the child think of possibilities: "Would it help to sit by different friends?" "Do you need to tell your friends that you want to finish your work before you talk?"

In order to be effective at this part of communication, you should concentrate on what the child says, try to notice how the child feels, and ask questions that help you understand better. (For more information on how to show understanding, see Extension Circular HE-682 in this series, "Being Understanding: A Key To Developing Healthy Children.")

In order to understand children's meanings, it is often helpful to stop what you're doing, sit at their level, and, if you're listening to a small child, put her in your lap. Even if the child is older, you might put a hand on her shoulder or arm, look into her face, and concentrate on what she says. Of course, if the child is uncomfortable being held, don't try to force contact.

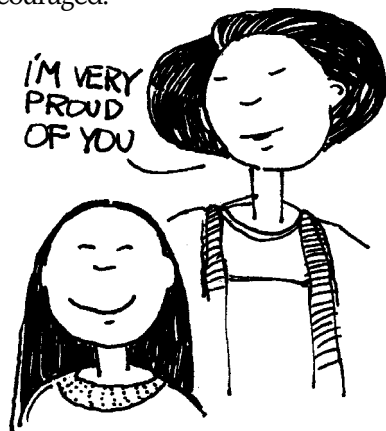
As you listen to the child, you may be tempted to argue or correct. What is the message you send to the child if you argue with him or correct him? Is that the message you want to send? Wouldn't it be more helpful to listen, understand, and help him make decisions?

## Send clear and encouraging messages.

The next step in being an effective communicator is to send clear messages. Does our talk with our children ever sound like the following?

Why aren't you up? Are you going to sleep all day? Who said you could use that? Clean the dishes off the table. Hurry up and get dressed. Why did you put that on? Turn down the radio. Have you made the bed yet? That skirt is too short. Your room is a mess. Stand up straight. Can't you get anything right? Clean your plate. Quit chewing your gum like that. I don't care if everyone else does have one. Have you done your homework? Don't slouch. You didn't make the bed. Look it up in the dictionary. Get off the phone. Why do you do that? Turn the music down. Take the dog out. Turn that radio off and go to sleep.

We may think that such messages teach children to be responsible. But when most of the messages a child receives are like those, the child may feel dumb and unloved. The child gets instructions. But the other message that comes with nagging, reminding, criticizing, threatening, lecturing, questioning, advising, evaluating, telling, and demanding is that the child is dumb or bad. The child can get very discouraged.



But parents can learn to send clear and encouraging messages to their children. Consider the following:

Good morning. Thank you for hanging up your pajamas. Thank you for cleaning your plate. I'm glad you got yourself dressed. Will you help me?



Sometimes it's hard to be encouraging with our children because we're so worn out, tired, unhappy, or angry. It's easy to feel overwhelmed with all that a parent is expected to do. If you feel overwhelmed very often, you may want to read Extension Circular HE-674 in this series, "Taking Care Of The Parent: Replacing Stress With Peace."

Sometimes we try to express feelings to our children when we feel angry. Usually that is a bad idea. If you feel like hurting or insulting the child, wait until you have had time to calm down before you try to discuss your feelings. After you have had time to settle down, you may be able to share your feelings without insulting the child.

Taking time to encourage children pays off. And it's easier to deal with a child who feels understood, valued, and encouraged.

There's another kind of clear message that is important to send: the relationship message. A relationship message is any message that tells a person he's important to you. For example:

"I really enjoy being with you."

"Thank you for being a helper."

"You're a big help. I appreciate it."

"Will you come with me to the store? I like to have you with me."

By regularly sending positive relationship messages, we can make it clear to our children that we value them, respect them, and love to be with them.



## Share your feelings in helpful ways.

When it's necessary to share some hurt or frustration with your child, there are effective ways to do it. One way is to use "I" messages. "I" messages are different from "you" messages in which a person blames: "You make me so mad." "You're so inconsiderate." "You" messages hurt people.

In an "I" message, a person shares her feelings without blaming. An "I" message usually takes the form: "When (describe what happens that is a problem), I feel (describe the feeling)." For example:

"When I see mud on the floor I feel discouraged or angry."

"When you hit your brother, I feel sad and angry."

"When you leave your backpack on the floor, I feel frustrated."

"When you ask me questions while I'm on the phone, I feel trapped."

The key to a successful "I" message is that it informs the child of your feelings without insulting or blaming. A good "I" message also lets the child know what he is doing that is causing trouble.

Sometimes when we've had a bad day and are feeling very tired, it's good to let our children know how we feel so they won't think they're causing our crankiness. We might say, "I'm very tired today. I'm sorry I may be cross. Let's be extra careful today so we won't irritate each other."

## Keep the relationship positive.

Most of the messages we share with our children should be positive ones. It's good to tell them about our joys and accomplishments. It's good to tell them when they please us. It's good to share with them what we are learning. It's especially good when we tell them about the joy they bring to us. And it's great when we encourage them to tell us about their joys and accomplishments.

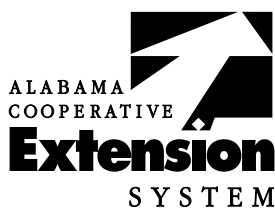
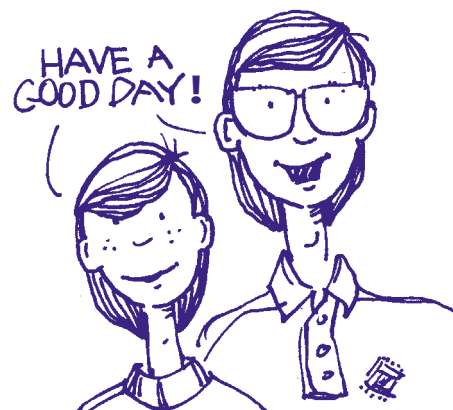
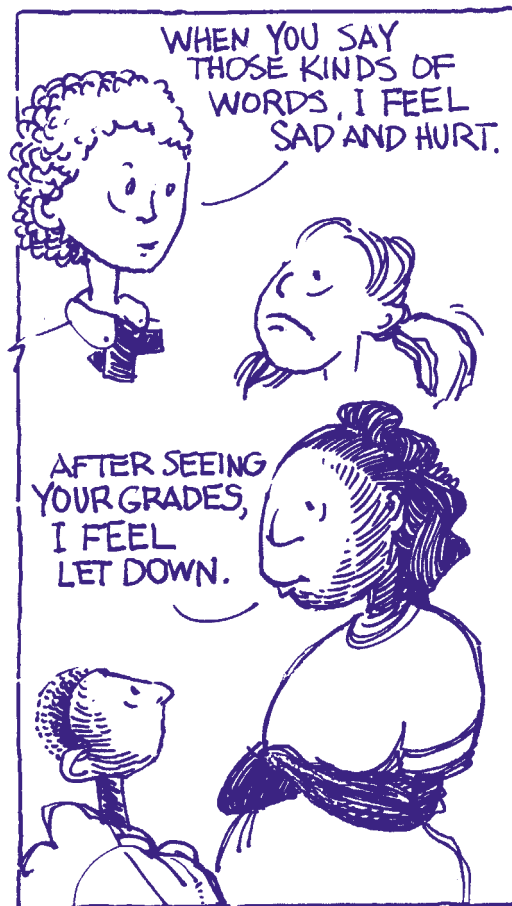
The purpose of communication with our children is to share love and caring while teaching them about suitable behavior. If we think about the messages we send, we can become more skillful communicators. It takes time and effort to become good at communicating. But it's worth the effort.

## If you want to learn more . . .

Faber, Adel, and Mazlish, Elaine (1980). *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen And Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York: Avon.

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