
COMMUNICATION – CRYSTAL CLEAR

How to
CONNECT
WITH YOUR CHILD

*use your head ...
and speak from the heart!*

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO BE THE BEST PARENT POSSIBLE.....	3
LAYING THE FOUNDATION	5
1. FEELING FRUSTRATED?	5
2. THE COMMUNICATIONS MATRIX.....	13
BUILDING UP A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP	29
3. WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT GREEN?	29
4. WHAT IS YOUR CHILD TELLING YOU?.....	35
5. WHAT ARE YOU TELLING YOUR CHILD?	45
HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD WITH PROBLEMS	53
6. WHY LISTEN IF YOUR CHILD HAS A PROBLEM?	53
7. HOW TO LISTEN SO YOUR CHILD WANTS TO TALK	61
HOW TO HELP YOURSELF WITH PROBLEMS	79
8. WHY TALK TO YOUR CHILD IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM?.....	79
9. HOW TO TALK SO YOUR CHILD WANTS TO LISTEN	87
HOW TO RESOLVE MUTUAL PROBLEMS	101
10. HOW TO DEAL WITH CONFLICTS CONSTRUCTIVELY.....	101
CONCLUSION: THE END OF THE BEGINNING.....	117
APPENDIX 1. PRACTICAL PROBLEM-SOLVING METHODS	119
APPENDIX 2. QUESTIONS PEOPLE OFTEN ASK	123
APPENDIX 3. SURVEY RESULTS: CHILDREN RATE PARENTS....	127

INTRODUCTION: HOW TO BE THE BEST PARENT POSSIBLE

"Trying to get through to my kid is like talking to the wall!"

"Where do I draw the line when it comes to discipline?"

"We're always arguing about how to deal with our kids."

"I feel like the family slave! I have needs and desires, too."

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Are you tired of the conflicts and misunderstandings? As a mother of four boys, I know what this can feel like! But we're supposed to enjoy spending time with those who are most important to us, aren't we? So what can we do to set things on a better course? How would it be to have a step by step approach to improvement?

As both a parent and a psychologist, I've spent many years observing and analyzing what happens between parents and their children. Together we'll look at a wealth of real-life examples, examining patterns and habits of communication. We'll explore a proven method of finding your way through these sorts of dilemmas. You, like many parents I've had the privilege of working with before you, will find more clarity when dealing with typical "problem situations" as well as everyday interactions in the family.

When your son refuses to do his homework, for instance, or your daughter won't clean up her room, what can you do about it? We'll be looking at ways of resolving dilemmas like these. You'll learn methods that you can use to generalize from one specific situation to others systematically, once you understand their similarities. It's like having a master cookbook that's so clear and so thorough that you can create practically any recipe you need!

You'll find yourself becoming more relaxed as a parent. Problems won't seem so overwhelming, because you'll have a much better idea how to deal with them. Parenting will be more rewarding and less stressful. The ways that you and your children communicate with one another will become more constructive. So get ready! We're in for a wonderful adventure together.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

1. FEELING FRUSTRATED?

Welcome to parenthood! You've already taken the first step toward making things better: you recognize that something is amiss. It's absolutely normal to experience complications in family life. It's guaranteed. What's important is *how* you deal with the complications when they arise. Can you do it in a way that improves the relationship you have with your child?

There's a nice thing about problems: you almost always get another chance (and another and another ...) to do things differently. The difficulties that crop up in families tend to recur. Otherwise you probably wouldn't view them as difficulties in the first place.

How to get the most out of this book

There will be many suggestions for practical exercises throughout this book. The more you make use of such opportunities, the more you and your children can benefit. There will be no "right" or "wrong" answers. What's right for one individual isn't necessarily right for another.

The ideas I present to you in this book have worked well for me and many other parents. Give them a good try, and then make your own decisions about what helps you.

How do you know if someone has a problem?

Let's say you have a feeling that something is bothering your child. What are some of the signs that point you in that direction? Many times we have

no clue as to what is amiss, but we notice that something just isn't right. Take a few minutes now to note all the possibilities that might tip you off. For instance, if your child is usually very talkative and suddenly becomes very quiet, that could indicate a problem. Bear in mind that a "problem" can be anything from a mild disturbance to something really big.

How I notice that my child is bothered by something:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- ...
- ...
- ...

Here are some signs that a child may be disturbed about something:

body language:

stooped posture, moving more slowly than usual

facial expressions:

looking sad, worried, scared, distracted

mental capabilities:

difficulty concentrating, trouble remembering

emotions:

aggression, withdrawal, sadness, anxiety, irritability

physical signs:

changes in sleep patterns, changes in toileting

verbal communication:

less or more than usual, louder or quieter than normal

What about the situation where there doesn't seem to be anything bothering your child, but you find that you yourself are disturbed by

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

something? There are often early warning signs, even before you know exactly what's disturbing you. Jot down the changes you might notice in yourself when a difficult situation is brewing.

How I notice that I am bothered by something:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- ...
- ...
- ...

Here are things I sometimes notice about myself when something is bothering me: I have less patience than usual, a decreased ability to concentrate, a tendency to become less diplomatic than I know I should be, or I'm more likely to be frustrated by small things. A friend of mine says she sometimes notices "a feeling of non-specific impending doom" when something is bothering her. Each person has somewhat different tendencies in general, and doing exercises like these can help us recognize signals of our own particular "hot button" areas. The specifics of the situation play a role, too, of course. For example, rainy weather is less likely to bother me if I'm working in the office than when I have my heart set on doing something outdoors. Simply being aware of such differences can be a first step toward minimizing difficulties.

What's the problem?

We have now looked at what we might notice when a person has a problem. That person might be our child, or our self, or maybe both of us are experiencing difficulties. What is it that actually happens – or doesn't happen – that leads to that state?

Please take a few moments to think about an actual problem you've had. Was there something you needed but didn't have? Or did you want something that wasn't forthcoming? That "something" isn't limited to tangible or material items. It could be the sleep you need when you're dead tired, or the good listener you're wishing for when you've had a terrible day.

Now think about a time your child had a problem. What was it that was lacking? Was something standing in the way of the child getting what she needed or wanted? Maybe your child was hungry and the food wasn't ready yet. Perhaps most of the neighborhood children were away and there weren't any playmates.

I have more clarity about myself when I can differentiate, for example, between my running low on patience (an indication that something is amiss with me) and the realization that I haven't had a decent meal in many hours (a basic need of mine isn't being met). I like to conceptualize a problem as a *situation in which a person's needs or desires are not being met*. Think about a specific experience you've had where you felt uncomfortable. Then try out this description of "problem" – a situation in which your needs or desires aren't being met – and see how well this definition fits.

Basic needs

Here's another useful exercise: make a list of all the different types of needs that occur to you. Then jot down whether you think each is relevant to children, to adults, or to both. For example, we need nourishment. We also need to socialize. (Granted, people differ on this score!)

<i>needs:</i>	<i>children?</i>	<i>adults?</i>
1. nourishment	x	x
2. socializing	x	x
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- ...
- ...
- ...
- ...
- ...

I wonder if you've discovered something that many of the participants in my parenting classes have seen: parents and children really do have a lot in common when it comes to basic needs. Of course, they don't always have the same need at the same time, as when a baby wants to play at 4 A.M. and the parents want to sleep. That's when conflicts materialize.

A lot has been written on the topic of universal human needs and the idea that there are generally priorities when it comes to satisfying needs. (Probably the most well-known model was developed by Abraham Maslow.) For instance, there are basic biological requirements for sustaining life, like water and food, sleep, air. What happens to other needs when an absolutely life-critical need isn't being met? The others tend to fade into the background. If you can't breathe, you won't be thinking about much else!

Only when those vital needs are satisfied is it usual for people to be concerned about the next level, which is very important but not as immediately critical: safety – with regard to one's body, family, home. Thinking in this way makes it easy to understand why someone would risk his safety to obtain food, for example.

A further category is that of love, belonging, acceptance. Again, it is generally the case that the previous levels need to be in order before attention can be given to this next (less urgent) area. When a family environment is abusive, for example, a child cannot develop feelings of being loved and accepted. Here's a different sort of example, but it illustrates the same point. My husband and I were in an amusement park, on one of the rides. It was a huge structure that swung back and forth, gathering more and

more momentum until it felt as if all of us would swing over the top and go flying. Suddenly I became very frightened, and began thinking I was about to die. My husband, trying to comfort me, told me that he loved me. I screamed back at him at the top of my lungs, "I don't *care!*" (Actually, I was even more graphic than that.) Right then, believing my safety was on the line, his message of love was totally irrelevant to me!

Let's take this whole concept one step further: if a little girl hasn't had the experience of being loved and accepted the way she is, how can she develop self-esteem and self-respect (yet a further level of human need)?

Here's a way of looking at the four categories just described:

4. *self-respect*
3. love, *belonging*, acceptance
2. *safety*, security (body, family, home)
1. biological requirements for *staying alive*

I find it constructive to use a model like this when considering people and their problems. We sometimes find that the most visible "problem" is actually a result of needs not being met at a more basic level. A child who fears for his bodily safety in the schoolyard may stop caring about how well he performs in the classroom. A child who steals, even though he knows it's wrong, may be lacking something much more fundamental than moral conviction.

Generalized models of this sort help us grasp "the big picture." It's equally important to keep in mind, though, that people are unique. We're all different, even when it comes to needs as basic as sleep and food. Some people can get along just fine on five hours of sleep a night, for instance, whereas most others need significantly more.

Parenting goals

How is the topic of human needs related to our goals as parents? And what are our goals, anyhow? Of course we want our children to be happy, productive, law-abiding, and so on. The list could be almost endless. Please take a moment now to note the most important goals you, as a parent, have for your children.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

What I want for my children:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- ...
- ...
- ...

When I think in terms of need fulfillment, I come up with something pretty simple and straightforward as my goal for my children: *I hope they will be able to fulfill their own needs and desires and, at the same time, respect other people's right to do the same.* I hope this will be a useful framework for you, too.

Clear communication

We began this chapter with the question, "Feeling frustrated?" When there are no problems between us and another person, it's usually not of critical importance to think about how to communicate with that person. It just flows naturally. When there's some difficulty, though, it can be a huge help to examine our ways of talking and listening.

How effectively are we communicating with our children? What does "effective" mean? So many times, a person says and means one thing – and the other person understands something quite different from what was intended. Sometimes it's as if they don't even speak the same language! We can define "effective communication," then, to mean that the message intended by the "sender" of the message is the same as what is understood by the "receiver" of the message. Although this isn't totally possible, since the sender and the receiver are two different individuals, we can do a lot to approach that goal.

For us as parents, this definition works in two directions. On one hand, we want to be able to communicate clearly to our children, so they understand what we mean. On the other hand, we also need to be receptive to our children in a way that enables them to communicate their thoughts and feelings to us. The first category can be thought of as *giving* information, the second as *receiving* information. These two categories of skills will constitute the bulk of our journey together throughout this book.

A frame of reference

Over the years I have dealt with countless situations where something has gone wrong in the communication between people. After the fact, it's often possible to analyze *what* actually happened and *where* something went awry. The ultimate goal, though, is to recognize what's happening *as it happens*, rather than afterwards. That way it's possible to get things back on track right away. In order to assist myself and, therefore, other people in pursuing this goal, it has been useful to me to work with a theoretical framework that I call the "Communications Matrix©." The matrix helps us see certain things with great clarity. Is it exciting? You bet!