

Communicating with Your Child

From the California State PTA *Parents Empowering Parents (PEP) Guide*



Communication is the key to effective parenting. It requires constant effort, but the rewards are great. When you communicate your feelings honestly and openly – your feelings of caring, respect, love, as well as unhappiness and anger – a stronger relationship develops between you and your child. This gives your child a model for communicating his/her own feelings, and your home is where he/she can do so safely.

Communication Is a Two-Way Street—

Listen

- Let your child know that what he/she has to say is important to you.
- Listen to him/her daily.
- Look and act and be interested without interrupting or being distracted.
- Show respect for his/her feelings and opinions without being judgmental.
- Ask him/her to do all of the above when *you* are talking.

Reflect

- Make sure you understand what he/she means by repeating back what you think you heard and asking if you understood his/her correctly.
- In a positive manner, rephrase what you thought he/she said until you both agree that *now* you understand what he/she meant.
- This feedback process doesn't necessarily mean you agree, but it shows that you understand what he/she is saying and that you are really listening.
- Ask him/her to do the same when you are expressing yourself.

Share

- Since communication is a two-way street, your feelings and opinions and those of your child must both be stated without criticizing or lecturing.
- Every single exchange does not need to be balanced, but make sure your communication is a genuine two-sided sharing.
- Besides creating a warm and caring environment, this process gives your child practice in developing communication skills.

Discuss

- Talk about issues. Sometimes if you do not agree, you simply can agree to disagree.
- When a solution is needed, work together to solve the problem.
 - Define the problem.
 - Set out the options.
 - Look at the pros and cons of each and at possible consequences.
 - Make a decision.
 - Plan to reexamine the decision after a certain time has passed.

Effective Praise — Tells your child, “I like what you did.”

- **Should immediately follow the desirable behavior.** The closer the praise is to the desired action, the more effective it will be.
 - **Example:** A mother tells her daughter, who has struggled for several minutes with a stubborn zipper, “You worked hard to zip that zipper!” Don’t wait until the next day and then say, “You did a good job of zipping your zipper yesterday. Can you do it again today?” Some children may not remember yesterday’s experience.
- **Must be sincere.** False praise is damaging, but you can always find something to praise sincerely, if you work at it.
 - **Example:** When your son asks, “How do you like my picture?” and you don’t like it, you can say, “I like the colors you used. It looks as though you enjoyed painting that picture.”
- **Is specific.** Children need to know exactly what you mean when you give praise or discipline.
 - **Example:** “I am really pleased you made your bed without my reminding you to do so.” You can praise the completed task or the effort of trying. “You worked hard trying to get the wrinkles out of your bed.” Don’t just say, “Good kid,” which suggests that the child is the issue rather than the action being the issue.

Effective Discipline — Tells your child, “I like you, but I dislike that action.”

- **Is specific and immediately follows the undesirable behavior. It should help your child understand to what action you objected to and give a positive model for next time.**
 - **Example:** “I don’t like how you treated Jeff,” does not give enough information, nor does it give a model. Saying, “When you laughed at Jeff’s drawing, he was hurt,” states the action you didn’t like and opens the door for a solution.
- **Gives your child the chance to be part of the solution.**
 - **Example:** “If you did not like Jeff’s drawing, what could you have said or done that would be honest, but still kind?”

Must be consistent and fair. If you object to a certain kind of behavior one day, your child needs you to object to the same circumstances on other days. The behavior you are requiring must be within your child’s ability. Don’t expect the same abilities—attention span, memory, or eye-hand coordination—from a three-year old that you expect from a six-year-old.

On the other hand, if a child thinks that a brother or sister is getting away with behavior that is forbidden to him/her, the discipline standards must be examined carefully. If there are genuine reasons for the difference, they must be explained, and the child who feels unfairly treated needs the opportunity to say so. You don’t help your child, if you do not require lovingly that he/she live up to the best he/she can do.