

Communication

INTRODUCTION FOR PARENTS

Robert was a new employee with his company. Getting established as a successful salesman demanded a great deal of time and energy, both physical and emotional.

"I would sometimes wake up at night," Robert said, "in a cold sweat feeling anxious about whether I would make it as a salesman. I worried about having enough money to make ends meet. Some months I made adequate income and some months I did not.

I was becoming an emotional wreck, but didn't share my feelings with my wife Sherie. I guess because I didn't think it was the macho thing to do. I wanted to appear strong and in control to her. But she wasn't fooled. One evening while we were walking in the park, she said, "Robert, you're feeling pretty uptight about how things are going at work, aren't you?" I told her that I was not tense at all, that everything was okay. She didn't let me off the hook. "Yes, you are worried," she insisted, "and I think it's natural. But I don't like to see you feel this way. Let's talk about it and see if your situation is as bad as it seems, and what we can do to make things better."

At that point I opened up to her and shared all of my frustration and concerns. I felt like a dam had been opened up inside me. I had not talked with anyone about this and it was a great relief to finally get it out. We talked about ways to cut our expenses and things we could live without. Then Sherie asked me, "What is the worst thing that could possibly happen?" I answered, "The worst thing is that I would lose my job." Then she reminded me that if I lost my job we would still be able to make it on her income, and her job was very stable. We would have to make some changes, but we could make it.

That talk helped a great deal. My sales gradually increased and today I'm one of the top salesmen for the company. But that's not the most important part of the story. The most important part is that on that evening years ago Sherie was sensitive enough and interested in me enough to know that I was hurting and needed to talk. She cared enough to start the conversation. As a result of talking through that situation, I felt closer to Sherie than I ever had. I think that established our close bond with each other more than any other single event, and it set the pattern for that type of caring, open communication."

(Story from the manual "Celebrating Family Strengths" produced by the University of Oklahoma.)

Communication is the process or way we transfer information from one person to another so that it is received and understood. Received and understood are the key words. We can't call it communication if one person talks and another appears to listen. It is only communication--real communication--if information is received and understood.

In the book *Secrets of Strong Families*, Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain write, "Good

communication isn't something that just happens among strong families, they make it happen. "

We could say that communication is a two-way street with lots of traffic signs and billboards. To really communicate we have to be able to read the signs as we drive and watch for oncoming traffic. Let's view those two sentences from three angles. First, "Communication is a two-way street." Two or more people need to be involved for communication to exist. If we, as parents, are the only ones talking, and our children are not listening, we are not communicating. There is a saying, "I don't care how much you know until I know how much you care." We need to be sure our children know without a doubt that we love them, and that we truly care about their well-being. Then, with confidence in our love and concern for them, usually our children will more readily listen to us.

Second, I believe that as we communicate with our children they give us "lots of signs and billboards" to both direct us and distract us. What our children say...the words that come out of their mouths...do not always reflect their honest, heart-felt feelings. As parents we need to be constantly "reading the signs" of our children's body language, the expressions on their faces and their tones of voice. Sometimes we need to listen "between the lines" and try to hear what they are *really* saying...try to understand how they are honestly feeling. Peter Drucker once said, "The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said."

Third, "...we will have to watch for oncoming traffic" could mean that as we talk with our children we should expect occasional negative and/or hurtful words (oncoming traffic) which they don't really mean, or which they unintentionally communicate badly. Again, we have choices. Three wrong ways we could react to unkind words are to be offended, to "get even" by retaliating, or to stop talking. As parents we have the responsibility to teach our children productive behavior by our example. When the oncoming traffic is heavy and harmful, we should choose to use a communication skill which will prevent a collision, and steer the conversation onto smooth roads. What we say will vary by situation, so it is important to know a variety of good communication skills, and then to be sensitive and creative in our methods.

A key to communicating well with our children is to try to remember what it was like to be a child or young adult. Whether the one to whom you are speaking (or listening) is three, thirteen or twenty-three...try to be that age in your mind while you are communicating. Try to "walk a mile in their shoes" and think about being them, with their life experiences, their needs and desires. Then you will be able to use the understanding from that position, and add it to the wisdom of your adulthood, resulting in a wonderful place from which you can communicate with empathy and discernment.

If we can put into practice what we've learned about speaking with kindness, and combine it with sharing our hearts openly, and listening with the intent to understand and help, we are on the

road to being able to communicate deeply and effectively. Strong relationships are built not on “surface talk,” during which people only discuss the weather or other non-threatening subjects. Usually relationships which stand the test of trials and time are those whose participants are willing to communicate the thoughts and honest feelings of their hearts. By doing so, they risk ridicule and rejection. Nonetheless, these people accept that risk because they cannot be satisfied with anything less than sincere, honest, meaningful relationships.

I believe most parents sincerely desire to have meaningful relationships with their spouses and their children. They want to understand one another's true feelings...the innermost thoughts and desires of family members. Parents often just lack the communication skills which allow this to happen. Perhaps because of the way we were raised we never saw people communicating well; the examples in our lives may have been less than ideal. Again, we have choices. We can choose to begin today to learn the skills of effective communication, and then practice and practice until these methods become “second nature.” I can promise you that, with practice, you can feel very comfortable using the four parts of communication suggested below, and comfortable with the communications skills outlined in the lessons which follow.

Learning and strengthening communication skills doesn't mean an end to all problems; it doesn't mean that strong families don't have conflict. They do. Family members get angry with each other, misunderstand one another and sometimes just disagree. But when they communicate they're able to get their differences out in the open where they can talk about them, discuss the problem and come to a satisfactory solution which is agreeable for everyone. That doesn't mean that the solution will give all involved exactly what they want, it just means they've reached a common ground upon which they can agree.

What are some of the advantages of positive, open communication? Family members who have learned to communicate well with one another have learned to talk and to listen carefully. They know and feel each other's joys and sorrows by sharing their thoughts. They know how to laugh together. They enjoy a sense of humor that brings happiness to their lives. Families who communicate well are able to openly express their feelings, differences, similarities and hopes for the future. They practice positive ways of handling conflict so problems are brought out into the open and discussed, and solutions are found.

Good communication also provides security and safety. People know where they stand in the family, and that contributes to a feeling of well-being.

Sometimes we take family communication for granted. We may think we communicate well just because we're a family or because we spend a good deal of time together. However, most of us can improve our communication skills.

Four parts of good communication:

1. Listening. Listening is vital to good communication. It strengthens relationships by showing that the listener cares about the person speaking. Really listening involves paying attention to what the speaker says both verbally and nonverbally. It is hearing with the heart as well as with the ears.

2. Rephrasing. Rephrasing is restating the basic message in fewer or different words, to be sure you understand the speaker and to let him know you're listening and trying to understand.

3. Probing. Probing encourages the speaker to say more by asking questions about his feelings. Probing directs the speaker's attention inward to examine his feelings and thoughts in more depth. This also shows caring and concern on the part of the listener.

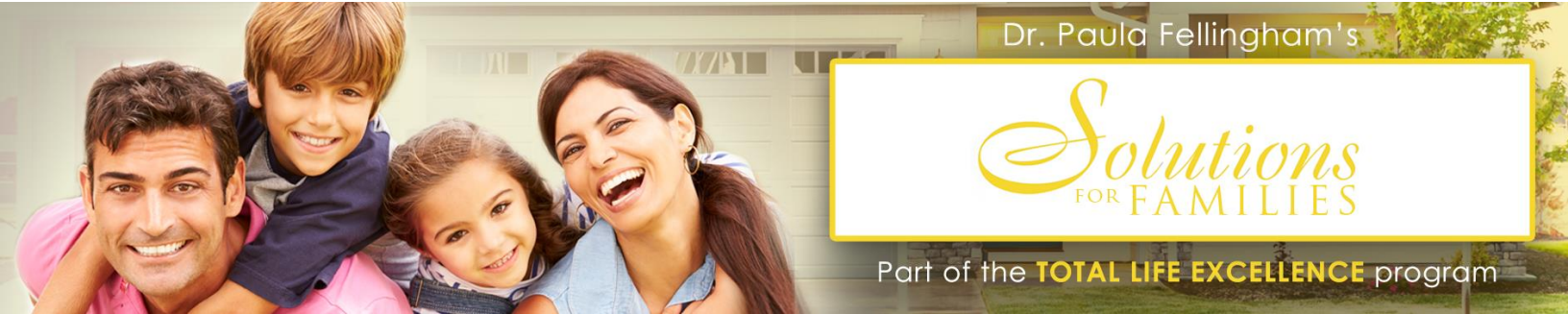
4. Positive Speaking. Positive speaking shows kindness and demonstrates that relationships are valued. Speaking positively aims at strengthening relationships by building up the other person.

Relationships are built one interaction at a time. Each interaction moves the relationship in positive or a negative ways. We usually can't change relationships over night, but making improvements in our communication skills will always move them in positive directions.

Just a few last thoughts about communication. I have learned that when I do the following things as I communicate with my children, my relationships with them are positive:

- Show unconditional love as I think, speak and act.
- “Be them” for a moment as we talk together. By this I mean to have empathy for their position as I remember what it's like to be young, and try to think like they are thinking, with their life experiences, needs and desires.
- Understand their honest feelings before I try to be understood.
- Listen carefully.
- Speak positively.
- Respond in a way that will be helpful.

Dorothy Nevill made an insightful comment: “The real art of conversation is not to say the right thing in the right place, but to leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment.” Indeed, learning to communicate well is a skill which takes a lifetime. I agree with Max De Pree when he



Dr. Paula Fellingham's

Solutions FOR FAMILIES

Part of the **TOTAL LIFE EXCELLENCE** program

said, “There may be no single thing more important in our efforts to achieve meaningful work and fulfilling relationships than to learn to practice the art of communication.”