

# Positive Family Communication

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**Good family relationships are built on strong communication. This guide will discuss verbal and nonverbal communication techniques that can help improve family communication.**



**MontGuide**

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**GOOD FAMILY RELATIONS ARE BUILT ON STRONG** communication, helping create and keep strong family ties. This is true for how we talk with any family member.

Communication is how we send and receive messages in ways that create understanding between individuals. It is what we say and how we say it. Most communication is nonverbal. Our body language, the expressions on our face, and tone of voice give the receiver more information than what is verbally said.

## Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication has many functions. First, it gives us information about the sender's mood or intent of the message. Next, it helps to control the conversation. It tells us when the speaker is done talking. This can also help us know how long the conversation should be. When trying to speak to a person who appears rushed, we are likely to cut our conversation short.

Finally, nonverbal communication defines the relationship between the sender and receiver. For example, the way we speak to our boss is different from how we talk to our spouse or partner.

Facial expressions are one of many ways that we express nonverbal communication. Understanding someone's facial expressions is a way we show others about our emotions and mood. Smiles and frowns have the same meaning no matter what culture one is from.

Eye contact is another form of nonverbal communication. Eye contact shows a person whether or not you are paying attention and tells them you are listening. Gazing past a person tells the person speaking that you are distracted or not interested. When speaking with a loved one, remember to engage in eye contact as that shows respect, care, and genuine interest.

Our posture sends nonverbal messages to the other person. Sitting at the same level with a person is less threatening. This is also true if you are at the same eye level. Using these techniques, you have a better chance of engaging in a meaningful conversation. It is important to avoid crossing your arms because this can be interpreted as someone who is angry or upset. For example, save nonverbal cues like crossed arms for when you are trying to be firm when your teen breaks an important family rule.

## Family Rituals and Family Stories Creating Communication

Family routines or rituals communicate to family members what is valued in the family. Family mealtime is a ritual that communicates the importance of talking with one another, practicing good nutrition, learning and enjoying time together. Attending faith-based services is another form of ritual that sends the message that the family's religion is an important part of the family values. Family game night is an example of a ritual that tells family members that regularly having fun together is essential.

Family stories help to communicate the values families hold dear. Family stories are commonly passed on from generation to generation and can take on a new meaning over time. An example would be a story that illustrates family perseverance. "Remember the year after the big forest fires when Dad lost his job and we moved in with Aunt Rita and her husband? We stayed there six months as Dad went out every day looking for work. He finally found a job and a new house for us. I got to push two overstuffed chairs together to make my bed every night. That was fun." Stories like that may bring back memories of hard times but, for younger generations in the family, the stories tell the importance of continuing to try, and how family will always be there to help you out.

## Making Time for Conversation

Families today are busy. School, children's activities, and parents' work schedules make it hard to find time to spend together. Families today spend less time eating meals together. They have fewer family talks, children have less free time, family members have more scheduled time and less time to enjoy one another. It is important for families to make time to talk, and having a meal together does more than improve eating and nutrition habits. During a family mealtime young children expand their vocabulary and communication skills by hearing their parents communicate. Family cohesion is built as children learn the importance of setting a routine time for the family to get together. Parents' positive communication styles can be taught to the children during these interactions.

One place many families find to talk is in the car. Today's families spend a good deal of time in the car going from one activity to another. Parents might also make time to talk to children at bedtime. Another idea is to have "dates" with a family member to spend one-on-one time.

## Learning Skills for Meaningful Conversation

As busy parents we think we are listening to our children but we may not really hear what they are saying. Children often won't talk when asked too many questions.

When your child comes home from school, try using a conversation starter with a question that can't be answered by "yes" or "no." For example, what was the best part of school today? Or, tell me about what you did in science class? Sometimes saying nothing can start a conversation. One mother told me the best way to get her teenage son to start talking was simply being in the house but not saying anything. After a time he would start sharing his thoughts.

Reflecting on what your child tells you also helps to

open communication. For example, if your child comes home saying, "I hate school," instead of asking why, try using reflection. "Sounds like you had a rough day at school." This validates the child's feelings and lets him know that you are listening. More likely than not, he will start to tell you about what is bothering him.

When talking with your spouse or partner about a sensitive topic try using "I" statements. "I really feel unappreciated when I find magazines left lying on the floor in the living room. I wish magazines were put back on the shelf after reading them." Here you are telling your loved one how you feel, why you feel that way, and what you would like to see done differently. This method is much less threatening than "You always leave your magazines lying on the floor in the living room after reading them and you don't care about all I try to do to keep the house neat when I too work full time." This statement sounds like the start of an argument.

Restating what is said is another skill to support good communication. For example, "I am so angry because no one in this house puts my tools away." Try restating the concern by saying "Am I hearing you correctly that you can't find some of your tools?" In this way you can be sure that you understand the problem. If you are not right, the other person can clarify.

Allowing the other person to finish talking before you begin is another good skill. This sounds simple but is often hard to do. We find this to be especially true with our family members. Why? Because we have stronger feelings about our family members than we do with people who are not part of our family.

## Managing Family Communication

With cell phones, busy schedules, and children's activities, keeping family members informed can be challenging. Some families use a white board to list each member's activities by date and time. Others may use day planners, while others write activities on a calendar, or use a shared digital calendar. Make a system that works for your family. Find a place to note each family member's schedule. This helps to avoid miscommunication about important events.

It is important to be respectful of other family members and their activities. Have a place for family members to leave notes about where they are and what time they will be home. A white board or a desk with a notepad can be helpful. Ask that everyone use the same place to post a note.

## Family Meetings

Family meetings are a chance for family members to discuss family issues. Topics you might include are schedules, events, and/or problems. Family meetings can also be used to celebrate accomplishments! There



are many ways to have a family meeting. Some are more formal than others. Make sure all family members can attend. Let family members know the agenda of the meeting and include a spot for additional agenda items. Have ground rules. Ground rules might include

- no interrupting others
- no yelling or swearing
- no putting others down
- use “I” statements
- a willingness to listen to another’s point of view
- end the meeting with a fun activity such as a board game, a family snack, or a walk together

You might want to select a family member to facilitate the meeting. Some families have one person who writes down what was decided at the meeting as a reminder.

## Family Communication Networks

Families have different ways in which the members communicate. This often is related to how the family identifies who is in charge.

**Wheel Network.** Some families have one person who is the center of communication. Often this is the mother however it can be any central family member who is viewed as the “center” of family communication. This network looks like a wheel. Communication lines go from the person at the center to each family member. The mother controls the messages and can adapt them as needed with each family member.

**Chain Network.** Other families may use a style that resembles a long chain. Here one person is in charge at the top giving messages to the next person down the line. This person then gives it to the next person down and so on. In busy families this type of communication may be needed. The problem is it is very “top down.” Only the second person in the chain hears the complete message.

**Y Communication Pattern.** Many stepfamilies use a “Y” type communication. The children are at the top of the “Y” and the biological parent in the middle. The stepparent is at the bottom of the “Y.” Messages to the children are given through the biological parent. This network may be useful as the members work to become a new family.

Messages in the networks discussed above are filtered through one person. Sometimes this is needed. It may help reduce family conflict. The problem is that it could also produce misunderstandings. The person who sent the message does not talk directly to all those who receive it.

**All Channel Network.** A fourth network style is the “all-channel” network. In this setting each family member talks directly with each other. There is no filtering of information. This style is used more when children are older. The information does not get distorted with this

style; however it is not as effective when information needs to get to everyone quickly.

Technology has changed how we communicate with family members. We can send messages to others regardless of where we are. While the communication patterns listed above may still apply, when texting or emailing individuals are unable to assess nonverbal communication. This can cause misunderstanding, even if one is including emojis! Be mindful of how messages may be interpreted when using technology. Follow up in person whenever possible.

Families with good communication use a mix of communication networks. That is because each type of network can be useful in a specific situation. What is important is that all family members feel heard and valued.

### How Do You Communicate With Your Family?

After reading this guide, list three positive ways you communicate with your spouse/partner.

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Next, list areas you would like to change or improve.

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Now list three positive ways you communicate with your children.

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Next, list areas you would like to change or improve.

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Keep these lists and review them in two months. Ask yourself, have I made positive changes in how I communicate with my family members? What is working and what is not working?

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