

Communication: An Introduction

Overview

We are by nature social beings, and communication plays a significant part in our daily personal and professional lives. Communicating is the foundation of relationships and interactions in our personal and professional lives. What comes to mind as you think about the word “communication?” Perhaps you are thinking about the words “talking” or “speaking.” Listening? Understanding? Body language? Brett Morrison says, “of all the life skills available to us, communication is perhaps the most empowering.”

Consider the ways you have communicated today. Did you have a conversation, send a text, or write a note? Maybe you smiled and said “Hello” to your neighbor or waved goodbye to a family member. Did you watch the news or read the newspaper? You may have checked your email or visited a social networking site. You could have done some or all of those things before even leaving home. What about after you left home? You may have talked to another commuter, shared information with a colleague, given notes to a friend, or given instructions to a clerk or waitress. Did you read any signs or check time tables? There are many forms of communication that we use on a daily basis to share and gather information and to express our thoughts and feelings to others.

Being able to effectively communicate one’s needs, feelings and emotions is critical to lifelong success. Effective communication helps us better understand people or situations and enables us to build trusting and respectful relationships, resolve conflicts, and create environments where ideas, problem solving, and empathy can flourish.

As simple as communication seems, much of what we try to communicate to others—and what others try to communicate to us—gets misunderstood. Our ability to communicate and understand others is dependent upon how we interpret and make meaning out of the information we take in. We take in this information using our senses, including hearing what others say, seeing body language, and experiencing emotional responses. We then make meaning out of the information. Challenges to communication occur when we consider the fact that the ways we interpret and make meaning of information varies from person to person. Miscommunications can cause conflict and frustration in personal and professional relationships. The way we make meaning of information is a result of our early experiences, our beliefs and values, and other influences. Pause for a moment and think about situations in your own life where communication seemed successful and unsuccessful. What feelings did you associate with these situations? Perhaps excitement, contentment or relief when communication was effective? Frustration, anger or disappointment when effective communication seemed difficult to achieve?

What is Communication?

Effective communication is more than just the exchange of information; it’s about understanding the emotion behind the message. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards defines communication as “a tool that human beings use to meet their physical, social, and emotional needs” (2012, p. 27). A goal of effective communication is to find a

balance between thinking and feeling. This balance involves conveying your thoughts without letting the emotion behind the message take over.

Effective communication involves a variety of skills, including nonverbal communication, active listening, emotional awareness, and the ability to manage stress. Communication can be achieved through spoken language, as well as through facial expressions, gestures, movements, postures, and touch. Pictures, images and written symbols are means to communicate. No matter the method, effective communication can help support and improve relationships, teamwork, decision-making and problem solving. According to researchers Robert Stillman and Ellin Siegel-Causey (1989), people communicate for different reasons:

- To affect another person's behavior
- To offer information
- To convey thoughts and feelings
- For the purely social reason of engaging in an interaction with someone

What are some reasons *you* engage in communication with other individuals in your daily life?

Communication is a vital part of nearly everything we do in our lives, both personally and professionally. We communicate in a variety of ways on a daily basis with the goal of being understood and understanding others. The main categories of communication are:

- *Spoken or Verbal Communication*: This category of communication uses oral language to share information or express feelings and thoughts. Examples of verbal communication include participating in a conversation or giving instructions.
- *Nonverbal Communication*: This is how we express our feelings and thoughts and share information without using spoken language. Examples of nonverbal communication are body language, gestures, facial expressions, touch, and the use of images.
- *Written Communication*: This category of communication uses the written language to express our feelings and thoughts or share information. Examples of written communication are posted signs, letters or email, labels, and creative writing. Electronic communication is a type of written communication. Examples of electronic communication are sending and receiving email and text messages and using social networking sites to share information or express our feelings and thoughts.

As we grow and develop, our ability to communicate is strengthened. Think about the difference in a child's ability to communicate versus an adult's. Can you remember what it was like to be a child and not be able to make your point understood or tell your family member or teacher what you needed? Chances are this felt very frustrating. This frustration is why children and youth often resort to nonverbal forms of communication such as crying, hitting, or acting out.

Young children are continuing to develop and strengthen their communication skills. They are learning appropriate ways of sharing information and expressing their thoughts and feelings, as well as being responsible for gathering and sharing information necessary to their lives.

Communication in Infants and Toddlers

Infants are born ready to interact and communicate! Even before they have the abilities and skills to interpret and speak words, they are attentive to sounds, facial expressions, and the

world around them. For example, infants will gaze into the eyes of their caregivers and take their turn in a conversation, such as “cooing” back and forth. Infants are intentional about communication and able to communicate specific desires and needs. Their intentionality is seen through the use of gestures, eye contact, and persistent attempts to communicate a request, such as crying when hungry. Infants quickly realize that when they make a noise, people respond. When families and professionals are consistently responsive to an infant’s cries, the infant begins to trust this means of communication because his needs are being met.

Infants also communicate with their families and professionals through nonverbal engagement cues. Infants might communicate their desire to engage and stay engaged by reaching for a caregiver. Families and early childhood professionals might see an infant’s eyes widen, a smile, or a turn of the head toward the caregiver. Infants also use disengagement cues to communicate that they are ready for a break from an interaction. Disengagement cues include whimpering, frowning, back arching, turning away, or an increase in the rate of sucking.

As infants grow older, they begin to babble and talk. They understand words used in combination with their caregiver’s gestures, tone and facial expressions. Close to 18 months of age, toddlers begin to use action words that express what they see or want, such as “me go,” or “boots on.” They also continue to physically express their needs and wants; what they do physically is just as important as what they actually say. “No,” and “mine,” are words toddlers use to assert themselves and take control over their world. Asserting independence is an early and important step toward becoming his or her own person. Toddlers are also experimenting with and beginning to learn the basics of grammar. For example, a 32-month-old might say, “I taked a nap today.” Toddlers can continue to understand how language works as their caregivers respond with the correct form, such as, “Oh, yes! You took a nap today. You were feeling quite sleepy.”

Learning to communicate and use language is one of children’s tasks during the first three years of life. As an infant and toddler caregiver, you play an important role in supporting the development of and the enjoyment in this process.

Relationships: How It All Happens

Relationships affect all areas of infants’ development, including communication. It is through relationships, for example, that infants and toddlers learn what happens when they cry, laugh or make a scared face. Through these consistent, appropriate and individually sensitive interactions, infants learn how to trust their caregivers, share emotions, respond and regulate strong emotions, and understand facial expressions and tone of voice associated with certain emotions (Smith, 2005). Infants develop trusting relationships based on the consistent and contingent care they receive from sensitive caregivers, and through these relationships they learn to draw understanding and build skills from their communicative and social interactions.

Communication in Preschool Age Children

Preschool-aged children are natural communicators! They soak up the details of the social world around them. As they play, they take on roles of moms, dads, teachers, and other people important to them. Sometimes the “try on” grown-up language like they try on clothes in the dramatic play area. As their vocabularies grow, language is no longer just a tool for

expressing wants or needs. Now they can use language to learn new things, imagine unknown worlds, explore ideas, tell jokes, create stories, and build friendships (Trawick-Smith, 2014). It is an exciting time of amazing growth! When preschool teachers consistently respond to children's communication, preschool age children learn to rely on language as a tool for meeting needs, solving problems, and learning about the world.

Each preschool age child's communication is unique. At three-years-old, most children communicate in simple sentences and can be understood by a stranger most of the time. You may hear mispronunciations like "aminal" for "animal" or "pasghetti" for "spaghetti." Preschool age children are still experimenting with and beginning to learn the basics of grammar. For example, a 5-year-old might say, "I eated all my peas at lunch," because he is trying to apply grammar rules he has learned. Young preschool age children can continue to understand how language works as teachers respond with the correct pronunciation or form, such as, "I see the animal in the farm" or "Oh, yes! You ate all your peas today. You were feeling quite hungry."

Communication in School-Age Children

Language is at the core of how we communicate and develop our communication skills. This makes communication a crucial part of a child's development, particularly their cognitive and social skills. Communication skills play a role in the way we create relationships and participate in social or academic events. Further, they are linked to our self-esteem.

As children develop, their communication skills are typically viewed by families, teachers, and pediatricians in four area or sub-domains. These are:

- Listening
- Speaking
- Reading
- Writing

These four areas are used to make sure that children and youth are on track with their cognitive, language, and social development.

Communicating with Others

Working with young children, requires early childhood professionals to communicate with families, children and youth, coworkers, school representatives, and community members on a regular basis. It is important to know when to use formal or informal communication methods, and which is appropriate in each setting, to effectively share information or express yourself.

Examples of formal communication are:

- *A planned meeting or conference.* When a meeting or conference is planned with a family, child, program representative, or other professional, formal communication methods should be used. Preparation is an important part of formal communication and you will need to gather the information necessary beforehand so you can speak knowledgeably on the subject being discussed.
- *A written form.* There may be occasions when you will need to complete a form or write a letter. Examples might include incident reports, certificates, or awards. You might use a form to document an incident or to record a conference or conversation you had with a family. To complete this task, you must ensure that you have accurate information.

- Activity planning. Planning activities will be another function of your role as a early childhood professional. It is important to do research, collect information, brainstorm, and use available resources when planning activities. This is considered formal communication because it is structured, planned, and presented in a form that will be displayed and shared with others.
- Activity presentation. Giving presentations to children, families, and the community is also a formal method of communication. You should plan and organize your information in a way that allows you to effectively and clearly communicate your plan or topic.
- Flyers or outreach materials. You may need to communicate with children, youth, and families about upcoming events. Flyers and announcements should be professional, attractive, and free of errors.

Examples of informal communication are:

- An unplanned conversation with families, children and youth, or other professionals. These conversations will make up the bulk of your communication with children, youth and families. They are unscripted and occur naturally. These conversations may be friendly exchanges about the day or brief reminders about upcoming events.
- Notes to families. You will often need to write a quick note to a family. This can be considered an informal form of communication. Examples of this may be reminding families to bring program materials for their child or about upcoming events.

As an early childhood professional, you will need to know when to use both formal and informal methods of communication. It is important to know when an informal conversation should become a formal meeting or conference. If a family member or child starts a conversation about a sensitive topic or addresses a private matter concerning an incident or situation, it is important to move the conversation to a private place. For example, if a parent comes to you while you are on the playground supervising children and youth, and wishes to discuss concerns about a recent incident, you should set up a time in the near future to sit down with the family and discuss their concerns. This would allow you to continue to properly supervise the children and youth in your care, keep the subject of the conversation private, and prepare for the meeting.

Supporting communication in young children

Young children watch, listen, and learn from the people around them. Communication and language development require other areas of development, such as visual skills, thinking skills, and memory, and the experiences offered contribute greatly to their development and learning. Young children learn to communicate not only through the words you use, but by what and how you do things, such as holding and smiling at them. Listed below are strategies which highlight ways to support communication for infants/ toddlers, preschool age children, and young school age children:

Infants/ Toddlers

- Touch, cuddle, and sing to babies and toddlers
- Point to objects as you name them
- Hold and rock infants/toddlers to communicate reassurance and comfort
- Invite babies/ toddlers to make sounds while singing and sharing nursery rhymes. Learn a few simple rhymes like “Hickory Dickory Dock”, “Humpty Dumpty”, and “Hey Diddle Diddle.” Sing simple movement songs like “Pat a Cake”, “Row, Row, Row your Boat”, “Where is Thumbkin?”, and “The Itsy Bitsy Spider.”

- Extend the sounds and words used by infants/ toddlers; for example, if a toddler says, “Me home,” you might say, “You want to go home. After snack time, Daddy will be here to pick you up and go home.”

Preschool Age Children

- Have a conversation with every child every day.
- Talk about objects and the categories they belong in (i.e., dogs are animals and cars are vehicles). This helps children understand connections between objects, categorization, and part-to-whole thinking.
- Help children expand their language and cognitive development by using prepositions like “over”, “under”, “in”, “through”, “between”, and “behind.”
- Remember that “Why?” is the favorite question of most preschool age children. Answer patiently and use it as an opportunity to talk about ideas and concepts.
- Explore the sounds in language with preschool age children; play rhyming games and sing silly songs.
- Use words to help children solve problems and expressions; say things like, “It looks like you’re angry. Tell Melvina why you are upset.”

Young School Age Children

- Reflect on how you communicate. Reflecting on a regular basis will help you become aware of how you are communicating and make you a stronger model for school-age children and youth. The following are some points to reflect upon:
 - Think about the ways you communicate in your daily life. Do you practice effective communication skills by making eye contact and actively listening?
 - What types of communication methods do you use?
 - What kinds of changes have you noticed in your own communication skills over the years? Have you become a stronger communicator since you were a school-age child? Do you shy away from communication and rely on emailing and texting instead of face-to-face communication? Are you more comfortable speaking in front of or addressing large groups?
 - How has technology played a role in the way you communicate? Do you participate in social networking and other digital forms of communication?

Thinking about these points on a regular basis will help you reflect on your own communication style and build upon your skills. Reflect on your own communication skills regularly will enable you to be a good role model for young school-age children.

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