

Communication with Young Children

Source: Child Welfare League of America

It is a real challenge to communicate effectively with young children. Learning a few new skills can make things go much more smoothly at home. Children will also benefit in many ways from learning these skills as you model them.

Here are some guidelines for making communication with your young child more effective and more fun. Remember, all of these might not be appropriate for all children and all families. You should always consider your cultural standards as well as your own values.

- Get your head physically on the same level as the child's.
- Make eye contact.
- Use a gentle touch.
- Speak with firmness, not anger, pleading, or whining.
- Give clear & consistent instructions.
- Avoid confusing contradictions or mixed messages.
- Don't give too many instructions at once.
- Allow children to make choices appropriate to their age level.
- Affection is often shown nonverbally. Be sure to hold a child for comfort and share smiles and hugs.
- Make every effort to keep promises.
- Avoid talking about children in their presence or saying things you do not want repeated.
- State things in terms of how a child's behavior is affecting you. This becomes more effective as the child grows older.
- Notice your body language.
- Don't try to trick children.
- Use Positive Direction Instead of Negative Statements:

Instead of: *Don't rock your chair!*

Try: *Sit on your chair.*

Instead of: *Don't touch anything, you're all dirty!*

Try: *Wipe your hands on this towel.*

Instead of: *Don't be so loud!*

Try: *Talk in a quiet voice.*

Instead of: *No you can't play outdoors, we have to go to the store!*

Try: *Yes, you may play outdoors when we get back from the store.*

Communication: Words and Actions

1. Often, it's helpful to say something indicating your confidence in the child's ability and willingness to learn.

- *When you get older I know you will (whatever it is you expect).*
- *Next time you can (restate what is expected in a positive manner).*

This affirms your faith in the child, lets the child know that you assume the child has the capacity to grow and mature, and transmits your belief in the child's good intentions.

2. In some situations, after firmly stating what is not to be done, you can demonstrate "how we can do it," or a better way.

- *We don't hit. Pat my face gently. (Gently stroke)*
- *Puzzle pieces are not for throwing. Let's put them in their places together.*

This sets limits, yet helps the child feel that you two are a team, not enemies.

3. Toddlers are not easy to distract, but frequently they can be redirected to something that is similar but OK. Carry the child or lead the child by the hand, saying

- *Peter needs that toy. Here's a toy for you.*

This endorses the child's right to choose what she will do, yet begins to teach that others have rights, too.

4. For every no, offer two acceptable choices.

- *No Rosie cannot bite Esther. Rosie can bite the rubber duck or the cracker.*
- *No, Jackie. That book is for teachers. You can have this book or this book.*

This encourages the child's independence and emerging decision-making skills, but sets boundaries. Children should never be allowed to hurt each other. It's bad for the self-image of the one who hurts and the one who is hurt.

5. If children have enough language, help them express their feelings, including anger, and their wishes. Help them think about alternatives and solutions to problems. Adults should never fear children's anger.

- *You feel angry because I won't let you have candy. I will let you choose a banana or an apple. Which do you want?*

This approach encourages characteristics we want to see emerge in children, such as awareness of feelings, and gives children tools for solving problems without unpleasant scenes.

6. Try saying "*You need to...*" instead of just telling the child what to do.

7. Avoid talking about children in their presence or saying things you don't want repeated.

8. Put suggestions in the form of questions: "*What would happen if you put the blocks together this way?*"