

Tip Sheet

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER for
HEALTHY MARRIAGE and FAMILIES



Tips for Service Providers: Healthy and Effective Communication

By: Victor W. Harris, Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension, University of Florida

Benefits of Healthy and Effective Communication

When we communicate in healthy ways, we can effectively interact in ways that promote appreciation, admiration, trust, and respect in our relationships. Developing healthy patterns of effective communication is as important in our interactions with family members as it is at work and in the community. Healthy communication supports healthy relationships in several key ways. Think about the following examples and consider your own patterns of interaction with your family and with clients.

Meeting Other's Needs: Meeting other's needs occurs when communication is used to help them: 1) feel safe and secure; 2) feel respected; 3) feel like they belong; 4) develop a positive self-concept; 5) develop positive self-esteem; 6) develop close real-love relationships; 7) achieve competencies; and 8) experience growth. Providers are effective at meeting these eight needs in relationships when they consistently communicate to others that they are both valued and capable.¹

- *How do you communicate to those around you that they are valued? How do you communicate to clients that you believe they are capable?*

Developing Relationship Virtues: When we witness healthy communication patterns, we tend to learn how to treat others in healthy ways. Learning healthy interaction patterns can develop character and relationship virtues such as greater awareness, balance, resilience, resourcefulness, positivity, kindness, appreciation, tolerance, respectfulness,

unselfishness, benevolence, humility, compassion, and forgiveness.

- *Who did you learn healthy communication patterns from? What relationship virtues were communicated to you? Which of these virtues do you exhibit when communicating with clients?*

“Ultimately the bond of all companionship, whether in marriage or in friendship, is communication.”

Oscar Wilde, Author

Developing Healthy Friendships: Developing healthy friendships is the foundation for long-lasting relationships. Creating and maintaining healthy friendships includes establishing positive patterns of interaction and disclosure, expressing realistic expectations, building trust and love, and successfully nurturing relationships through the inevitable ups and downs.

- *How do you use communication to develop and maintain friendships?*

Positive Interactions: Positive sending and receiving of verbal and non-verbal messages with at least a 5-to-1 positive-to-negative interaction ratio is an important factor in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships that are based on appreciation, admiration, trust, and respect.² Positive interactions communicate that others are valued and capable.

- *How do you communicate in positive ways?*

Expressing and Negotiating Realistic Expectations:

Expectations: Some of the greatest sources of unhappiness in relationships are associated with unrealistic, unexpressed, and unfulfilled expectations. Communicating expectations in healthy ways includes being: (1) aware of our own and others' expectations; (2) realistic about these expectations; (3) clear and candid when expressing our expectations; (4) willing to negotiate our expectations; and (5) inclined to prioritize others' expectations to be as important as our own expectations.

- *List some of your expectations in your relationships. Are they realistic? How do you communicate realistic expectations in healthy ways with clients?*

Building Trust: Developing trust includes perceiving others as dependable, available, responsive, able to negotiate conflict successfully, and worthy of continuing our relationship with them into the future. Trust develops in relationships as needs are met, virtues are experienced, positive interactions and disclosure occur, and realistic expectations regarding values and roles are expressed and negotiated in healthy ways.

- *How do you use communication to encourage trust with clients?*

Developing Loving Relationships: Loving relationships are developed by communicating love through loving behaviors, expressions of loyalty and commitment, and experiencing positive emotions. Knowing others' love languages (e.g., hugs and kisses, service, kindness, saying "I love you," support) and communicating in their love languages as often as possible creates deeper bonds.³

- *What ways do you use communication to develop loving relationships?*

Successfully Nurturing Relationships

through the Inevitable Ups and Downs:

Relationships tend to go through stages as they develop. Marriages go through at least three stages: (1) romantic love; (2) disillusionment and distraction; and (3) dissolution, adjustment with resignation, or adjustment with contentment.⁴ Ups and downs can occur in parent-child, co-worker, and client relationships as well.

- *How do you use communication to nurture your relationships through the ups and downs?*



Healthy communication includes both sending and receiving information. These next two sections offer tips on the sending and receiving of verbal and non-verbal communication messages.

Tips for skillfully sending messages:

Clear and Concise: To be clear is to communicate in a way that it is "easy to understand" what is meant "without confusion or uncertainty," while being concise refers to "using as few words [or gestures] as possible to give the necessary information."⁵ When dealing with difficult topics, it sometimes helps to write words down first, before expressing them, to determine the best things to say.

Straightforward: To be straightforward is to be *congruent* in communication or to “say what you mean and *mean* what you say.” When others cannot depend on us to tell them the truth, it diminishes the trust in our relationships.

Therapists spend a lot of their time with couples and families simply trying to help them learn to tell the truth to each other so they can build trust in their relationships.

Appropriate Dose: Skillful communicators send messages with the right amount of information and emotion based on listener age and capacity to receive so they are not overwhelmed with the information and emotion being transmitted.

Appropriate Time: Skillful message sending includes being sensitive about *when* and *when not* to send certain messages, such as when others are sad, angry, tired, or stressed.

Tips for receiving messages:

Listen Silently: Silent listening means not interrupting and includes all non-verbal messages sent by the receiver to the sender through eye contact, facial expressions, and body movements such as nodding the head, and arm, leg, foot, waist, or other body movements.

Listen Reflectively: Reflective listening is part of the skill of validation and includes paraphrasing what is being said by the sender or using what are called *bridge words*, such as, “Really?” or “And what happened next?” and “Wow, it sounds like that hurt?” to help validate that the sender is being heard.

Look for Common Ground: Skillful receivers look for points of agreement rather than disagreement to achieve an overall win-win for the relationship.

As you reflect on the benefits of healthy communication and the tips for achieving it, think about your own patterns of interaction as it relates to working with clients.

How do you:

- *Send clear, concise, and straightforward messages?*
- *Listen silently and reflectively?*
- *Communicate to others that they are both valued and capable?*
- *Use communication to build trusting relationships?*
- *Communicate your realistic expectations in healthy ways?*
- *Look for points of agreement?*

Develop Cultural Communication Competencies:

Skilled communicators are aware that others may communicate differently than they do. Smiles, emotional expressions, head movements, sitting/squatting, shaking hands, eye contact, silence, pauses, verbal expressions, volume, intensity, and directness may all mean different things to people from diverse cultural groups.⁶ Gaining the competencies to understand cultural nuances and how to communicate with diverse cultural groups is important so we can create an environment where everyone feels appreciated, admired, trusted, and respected and free to express themselves openly, regardless of their cultural background or heritage.

- What kinds of things are you doing to develop cultural communication competencies?

Visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families website (www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org) for more information on cultural competency.

Healthy Communication Benefits Everyone

Strengthening our communication skills and modeling these skills with clients builds trust and helps them understand the importance of healthy communication and healthy relationships.

Sharing information about healthy communication with clients helps them learn and model healthy communication skills for their families.

Strong Families: Tips for Healthy Communication

A companion tip sheet is available to share with families interested in learning about healthy communication:
<http://tinyurl.com/tips-communication-families-p>

Works Consulted

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