

Winning Ways to Talk with Young Children¹

Betsy R. Schenck²



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Talking with children involves the exchange of words, ideas, and feelings between two people. Communication is what we say and how we say it. We communicate with looks (scowls and smiles), with actions (slaps and hugs), with silence (warm or cold), as well as with words (kind and unkind).

Adults usually do not have any difficulty communicating with children when it simply involves giving directions on how to use scissors or explaining the danger of cars, but they do have difficulty communicating when feelings are involved—either the child's or their own.

Good Communication leads to:

- warm relationships
- cooperation
- feelings of worth

Poor Communication leads to:

- kids who “turn off” adults
- conflicts and bickering
- feelings of worthlessness

How to Win

Here are some winning ways of talking with children. Try them out. But remember, what works well for one person may not work for another. If these suggestions are not successful try other ways of communicating based on your own experience and understanding of your child.

Communicate Acceptance

When the child knows that you accept him, just as he is, it is possible for him to grow, to change, and to feel good about himself. When a child feels good about himself, he is likely to get along well with others.

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2. Betsy R. Schenck, former Extension specialist, Child Development, Virginia State College. Reviewed for use in Florida by Evelyn Rooks-Weir, former associate professor, Human Development; and Garret D. Evans, Psy.D., assistant professor, Clinical Psychology, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville FL 32611.

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Accepting the child, just as he is, makes it easy to communicate with him. The child who feels accepted will be more likely to share his feelings and problems.

When adults:

- threaten
- command
- preach
- lecture

The child feels:

- “I’m bad.”
- “You don’t like me.”
- “I can’t do anything right.”

For example: Larry says, “Mother, I’m afraid to sleep alone.” Which response encourages communication?

A. “You ought to be ashamed! You’re acting like a big baby! You know there is nothing to be scared of!”

OR

B. “I know you are frightened. I will turn on the night light and leave the door open for you.”

Remember: We can accept a child without necessarily approving of his behavior. For example, we love and accept Sandra, but we do not accept her behavior when she hits the baby or pulls the cat’s tail.



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Use Door Openers

Door openers are invitations to say more, to share ideas and feelings. They tell the child that you are really listening and

interested, that his ideas are important, and that you accept him, respect him, and respect what he is saying.

Examples:

“I see.”

“Tell me more.”

“Oh.”

“Say that again. I want to be sure I understood you.”

“Mm hmmm.”

“No kidding?”

“How about that.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Really?”

Door openers tell the child that his ideas are important, that you are interested in his ideas, and that you respect his ideas.



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Listen Attentively

Get rid of distractions and pay attention to what the child is saying. At times adults may need to stop whatever they are doing and listen to the child. It is difficult to run the vacuum cleaner, cook dinner, or read the paper, and at the same time pay close attention to what the child is saying.

Caution: Do not pretend that you are listening when you aren’t. If you are busy—talking on the telephone or entertaining guests—tell the child, “I’m busy now, but let’s talk about that later.” Then be sure to follow through.



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Use “You-Messages” to Reflect the Child’s Ideas and Feelings

“You-messages” describe the child’s feelings and encourage him to express his troublesome feelings.

Examples:

“You are sad because your dog died.”

“You are upset because you didn’t win the game.”

“You are mad because Jenny wouldn’t let you play with her new doll baby.”

When children are allowed to express bad feelings freely, they seem to disappear like magic. Hiding bad feeling is self-destructive. They do not disappear; they can lead to self-hate, headaches, ulcers, and violent actions.

Remember: Actions can be labeled good or bad, but not feelings. Feelings are neither good nor bad. They exist, and their existence must be recognized.

Use More Do’s Than Don’ts

Tell the child what to do rather than what not to do. *Using “Do’s” rather than “Don’ts”* is very difficult, especially if adults already have the “don’t” habit. It is very difficult to break bad habits. Using “Do’s” rather than “Don’ts” requires much thought and practice. However, the improvement in your relationship with your child will make it worth the effort.

Talk to children as you talk to your friends. If adults would talk to children with as much consideration as they talk to their friends, they could really communicate with children and be on the way to excellent relationships.

The Don’ts

- Don’t drag your coat on the ground.
- Don’t squeeze the kitten.
- Don’t slam the door.
- Don’t draw on the table.

The Do’s

- Hold your coat so it doesn’t drag.
- Carry the kitten gently.
- Close the door softly, please.
- You can color on this page.

Talk With (Not At) Children

Talking “at” the child is a one-sided conversation—“Put on your raincoat,” “You are going to spill that,” “You need a haircut.” Adults who talk “at” children often use the excuse that a small child cannot converse at the adult’s level. But no one—including the young child—likes to be talked “at.” You may talk “at” the family dog, or even a tiny baby, but try to talk “with” a young child.

Talking “with” a child is two-way conversation—talking to him and then listening to what he has to say. Forming the habit of talking “with” children rather than “at” them will be especially helpful when they become teenagers.



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Use “I-Messages” to Communicate Your Thoughts and Feelings

“I-messages” are statements of fact. They tell the child how his behavior makes the adult feel. Often children don’t know how their behavior affects others. “I-messages” are much more effective than “you-messages” when the child misbehaves.

Which sounds better?

I-message

- I need help in picking up now.
- I don’t feel like reading a story when I’m tired.
- I sure get upset when I see mud on the floor.
- I can’t hear you with all that screaming.
- I don’t understand.

You-message

- You sure made a mess.
- You’re a pest.
- You ought to be ashamed!
- You better shut up!
- You’re dumb.

“I-messages” give the child responsibility for changing his behavior. For example, if the adult says, “I see a dirt smudge on your face,” he is giving the child the responsibility to do something about the dirt smudge.

Caution: Do not use “I-messages” to express anger toward children. Expressing anger causes a young child to feel very upset and insecure. Instead of expressing anger, express the emotion which came before the anger. For example, if Bruce knocked over his glass of milk when the family had company for dinner, embarrassment probably came before anger. Say: “I am really embarrassed when you make such a mess.” Don’t say: “I’m really mad at you.”

Make Requests Simple

Young children have a hard time remembering several orders at a time. Have you ever asked for directions in a strange city? You were probably confused when told to “go six blocks, turn left and go past the gray slate building, turn right at the third blinker, go south and circle the courthouse.” Three-year-old Sarah will be just as confused when you say, “Go to your room and hang up your clothes but

first pick up your toys and put the dog out.” Probably Sarah and the dog will both disappear outdoors because “put the dog out” is all that Sarah remembers.

Get the Child’s Attention Before Speaking to Him

Children can concentrate on only one thing at a time. Call the child’s name and allow him time to turn his attention to you before speaking to him.

Examples:

“Jack.” (Wait until he stops throwing the ball and looks at you.) “Dinner will be ready in 15 minutes.”

“Jill.” (Wait until she stops playing in the sand and looks at you.) “It will be time to come inside in 10 minutes.”

Make Important Requests Firmly

Speak as if you mean it, and give the child a reason why he must do this thing at this particular time. A request made in a wishy-washy manner lets the child think you do not really care whether or not he does what you asked. A child can think about only one thing at a time. When he is involved in play, it is hard for him to shift his attention to you. Also, he doesn’t like being interrupted in his play any more than you like being interrupted when you are reading the newspaper.

Communicate at Eye-Level

Eye-contact improves communication. When talking with very young children, it may be necessary to stoop down to their level or to sit at a table with them.



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Adults fail to realize the effect that their size has on small children. How would you feel if a giant ten feet tall shook his finger and glared at you?

Say “Please,” “Thank You,” and “You’re Welcome” to Children

Children deserve the common courtesies which adults use with each other and children learn by imitating the speech and behavior of adults. Let them learn to say “Please” and “Thank you” by imitating you. Nagging a child to say “Please” sets a bad example; it is not courteous.

Try Not to Interrupt and Scold Children When They Are Telling You Their Stories

Jeanie came in quite excited and started to tell Mother about the good time she had playing at Betty’s house. Mother interrupted Jeanie—rudely and at great length—to scold her for going to Betty’s house without permission. Jeanie immediately lost interest in sharing her feelings with Mother. Mother certainly should remind Jeanie of the rule about asking permission, but at another time.



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Don’t Use Unkind Words Which Tear the Child Down

Unkind words have unhappy results and they cut off communication. Avoid unkind words that are:

- Ridiculing—“You’re acting like a big baby.”
- Shaming—“I’m ashamed of you.”
- Name-calling—“You’re a bad boy.”

Unkind words, spoken without even thinking of their results, make the child feel that he is disliked. They discourage the child and give him a poor self-concept. More

importantly, unkind words do not help. They only make matters worse.



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Use Kind Words to Encourage and Build Up the Child

Kind words bring happy results! They give the child more self-confidence and help him to behave better, to try harder, and to achieve more. They communicate love and respect and create an atmosphere in which problems can be discussed openly and understandings reached.

Suppose the child has spilled milk on the floor. You can say, “Don’t be so clumsy! Just look at the mess you made”—which leads to unhappy results. Or you can say, “Here is a sponge. Please wipe the milk up”—with happy results.

Examples of kind words:

“Thank you for helping me clean off the table.”

“You did a good job of washing the dishes.”

“That really makes me feel good.”

“I love you.”

“I like the way you remembered to hang up your coat.”

The Importance of Good Communication

Good communication helps children to develop confidence, feelings of self-worth, and good relationships with others. It makes life with them more pleasant now and helps them grow into adults who have good feelings about themselves and others.

See Self-Test (page 7) to test your knowledge.



Figure 9. monkeybusinessimages/iStock/Thinkstock.com

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Table 1. Self-test

SELF-TEST		
1. Translate these DON'Ts into DO's (Show the child what he can do).		
DON'TS	DO's	
Don't run in the store.		
Don't yell at me.		
Don't talk with your mouth full.		
Don't touch that.		
2. Change these statements to "You-messages."		
Child	Parent	You-message
"You're mean. You let Terry stay up later than me."	"I'm tired of listening to you argue with me."	
"I hate Paul."	"No, you don't. It's bad to hate people."	
3. Respond to these situations with "I-messages."		
Johnny crossed the street to play without permission.		
Ann drops jelly-bread on the new living room rug—disobeying the rule that foods must be eaten in the kitchen.		
Teacher reports that Barry got in a fight at kindergarden.		
Children fight and jump around in back of the car as Mother drives to Grandmother's house.		
4. Keep a record for one day of the things you say to a child when:		
It is time to pick up his toys.		
You think he has watched enough TV.		
You take him to the supermarket.		
He "bugs" you when you are very busy.		
5. Estimate the number of times during the day that you say:		
No.		
Don't.		
Stop.		
Quit that.		
Cut that out.		
You know better.		
6. Ask another person to tape record 10 minutes of your conversation with a child—when you are not aware that your conversation is being taped. Listen to the tape and evaluate your tone of voice.		