

Talking with 'Young people' Four Communication Essentials

The Communication I am talking about here, isn't the backwards and forwards of an ordinary conversation, but the form of Communication that can be helpful when you need to have the 'important chat' with a young person, possibly your son or daughter. Perhaps when they have been playing up a bit, or when you are worried about them, or when you want them to generally 'lift their game.' So the first thing is this: when you're angry and maybe even feel like shouting, this is probably **not** the best time for a chat. When a young person is acting badly in some way, we tend to focus on what they are doing wrong. And this is not helpful. Though perfectly understandable. We get frustrated, hurt, angry, and then we often say things which are less likely to help the young person get it right. So when you are a little calmer, the following may be helpful.

First decide what you would like to have happen. Get this firmly in your mind, and then choose words that are more likely to achieve this.

1. Focus on what you want, not on what you don't want
2. Use words that you want the person to have in their mind
3. Say clearly what action is needed, not what is NOT needed
4. When it's needed, be specific.

Communication Essentials, in a little more detail

These guidelines seem so simple and obvious yet are also so often overlooked. And it's because our powerful human emotions get in the way; we feel hurt, powerless, frustrated, humiliated, ignored, afraid; and then we often get angry, and everything then flows from this anger. So I want to spend a moment to look at the Essentials in more detail.

1. Focus on what you want, not on what you don't want

Focus on what you want. No-one likes being criticized or told they are wrong, and young people are extra sensitive to this. So it makes sense in conversation to focus *not* on what your son or daughter, or young person, is doing wrong but on what you actually want them to do. Don't talk about failure but success, focus not on them being rude but on them being polite, not on them being cruel but on them being kind, not on them being disrespectful but on them being respectful. This is infinitely more successful in helping your young person get it right. It expects the best of them, it assumes they have good intentions and it encourages their effort.

Focus on how. As the conversation develops you can start to explore the 'how' with a continuing focus on *how* to get it right. Focus not on getting angry, but *how* to stay calm? Not on having no control of life but *how* to take charge of life? Not on being selfish but on *how* to help the generous part come out?

Focus on help. The third aspect of focus is identifying what help your young person needs. How can I help you stay at school? What help do you need to keep you being respectful? What help do you need to help you get to school on time?

With all three parts operating, the discussion focuses on what you would like to happen, how to make it happen and what help the young person needs to make it happen.

2. Use words that you want the person to have in their mind

Imagine you look up and see your three-year-old child, walking along a tree branch high above the ground. What do you call out? Do you really want the words 'dangerous' or 'fall' in their mind at this time? The words 'go slowly', 'just walk' 'you're doing fine, 'keep going' might be better. Imagine that someone is drying plates that have been in your family for generations. Do you really want the words 'drop', 'smash' or 'break' in the person's mind? Be 'very careful with those plates' or 'go nice and slowly there' might be better. (Or forget clever communication strategies altogether and just dry them yourself or let them drip!) A young person is going for an exam, do we want the words 'fail' or 'anxious' in their mind? The words 'pass', 'do your best' or 'relax' might serve better. Possibly even 'have fun' might help the person feel more at ease, focus and possibly even enjoy the experience.

3. Say clearly what action is needed, not what is NOT needed

Fitting snugly with #1. & #2. above, continue to focus on what is needed and use words that support this.

- 'It would help the household a lot if you were more generous when playing your music.'
- 'We've agreed that you need to do more around the house.'
- 'Yes, you do need to be doing more study.'
- 'You do need to be making more of a contribution to this classroom.'

4. When it's needed, be specific

The fourth and obvious one that flows from #3 above, is to be specific. 'Come home early' may not quite get what you were looking for. 'Be home by 10.30' is more specific and tells the young person exactly what is expected of them.

- 'Being generous when playing your music' might be to turn it down when asked
- 'Doing more around the house' might mean putting the rubbish out each Tuesday evening. (They might need a reminder)
- 'Doing more study' might mean 2 hours a night week nights and 3 hours on a Sunday
- 'Making a contribution to the classroom' might mean researching a project and reporting to the class, on this Friday.

Exceptions to the rule

I am calling these 'exceptions' though in reality they are not. It may be the case that if someone continues on a genuinely destructive course with their anger they will be kicked out of school. And the conversation you have may well highlight this reality. If a young person does continue being mean to their siblings, they will not be allowed out on Friday night. If a young person does continue stealing they may well end up being arrested. This all seems like breaking rule #1 above by focusing on what you *don't* want. Yet what you are doing is asking the young person to focus clearly on what could happen and there are times when this needs to happen so they have a chance to rethink and maybe realign their focus. There is no threat about what will happen and no personal attack. It is a compassionate laying out of what might follow from a continued destructive choice. It is actually in keeping with the thinking of #2. What words do you want in the person's mind? And sometimes, the idea of possible failure, or expulsion, or being grounded or being arrested is just what you want in their mind on this occasion. And done with patience, calmness and love, this too can be an effective communication strategy leading to something which might prevent an unwanted outcome. Better yet, it might just lead to something terrific; that is, the beautiful things that might yet still be experienced.

All the best

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