

Communication Skills

Communication is complex. How we communicate is influenced by our emotions, thoughts, background, values and culture. It is also influenced by how others communicate with us and the setting in which the communication is taking place. Our communication patterns form early in life. We can see this in how our children communicate. It is not easy changing long standing communication practices or styles. Sometimes just changing one way we communicate can make a big difference in how we advocate for our child.

Where to start. Evaluate yourself by thinking about how effective you are when you communicate. Seek feedback from others. Ask what skills are strong which you might need to improve. Set small reasonable goals as you learn skills.

COMMUNICATION MAIN POINTS

- Most communication is non-verbal. What we say without words can be more powerful sometimes than the words we use. For example (eye rolling, crossing of arms, or turning away from the person speaking).
- Our emotional state can affect how we communicate. Do not communicate important issues if you are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired (HALT).
- Effective communication should be reciprocal and involve listening to the other person, checking for understanding, and then sharing thoughts.
- Trust and respect is the base for most successful communications. When trust is present it is easier to discard what the other person has said in error. Building trust is about engaging in positive conversation, often times it may not have anything to do with your child. It involves communicating around areas of mutual interest and showing positive regard for the person to whom you are communicating with. If we do not view someone in a positive light, or they do not view us in a positive light, it can be hard to listen with an open mind and have effective communication.
- Less is more. Long emails or letters are challenging for busy people to read and to capture the main points. Talking on and on about something also may result in losing the listeners attention.
 - Calm, concise communications that demonstrate the facts without opinions are often most effective.
 - A brief questions can also move a conversation forward.

COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

- Build small agreements: We all agree that Josh's grades are poor partially due to incomplete homework. Know that Josh's ADHD makes it hard for him to focus at night, can we all agree that he needs strategies to use study hall time more wisely?



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- Write it down: So that my notes accurately reflect this discussion, I want to confirm that you said...
- Take a break and focus: I am feeling overwhelmed right now, may we take a short break?
- State a fact and redirect to the agenda: It is my understanding the IEP can include goals for any area affected by the disability. Can we talk about a goal on homework completion and talk later about placement?
- Set a deadline: Can we meet in one month to check on Josh's behavior?
- Repeat and reflect to confirm: Are you saying that Josh is choosing not to do his work and that if he tried harder this would not be a problem?
- Use and ask for facts, data, and references: Who can provide some data or a reference on motivation in children with learning disabilities? Does anyone have training in this area?
- Ask and name what is happening: It is very quiet around the table, why is that? Or I am sensing that not everyone agrees with the way we're making this decision. Does anyone else have that feeling?
- Set and remind others about ground rules: Let's remember one of the ground rules we agreed to – no interrupting. Would you mind holding your thoughts until Dr. Smith finishes?
- Refer to an outside expert: Let's refer back to the report Dr. Smith provided the team that we accepted, where Dr. Smith refers to ADHD, fatigue and its impact upon school.
- Request to hold decision or judgement: Can we wait until the speech therapist finishes her report before the team considered a decision?
- Be creative: Maybe this is a good time to discuss how Josh's love of art could be used to motivate him to complete his work.
- Use body language: Lean forward to show interest, open hands, and uncross your arms.
- Use humor: Never use humor at the expense of another person.
- Defer: Would you be willing to wait until we look at the data before we affirm the present level of performance?

UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF AND OTHERS: COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVES

An important skill in advocacy is gaining an understanding of yourself and others. This requires you to place yourself in the other person's shoes. By doing this you can better understand their view of the situation as well as their view of your perspective. This also allows us to take an objective view of ourselves.

Start by thinking about the other person or people and what factors may influence their view. You may compare this to looking at an iceberg. Most of the iceberg is underwater and not visible or out of view.



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With educators, some factors that may be unseen are:

- A desire to help your child with mixed frustration of 30 other children in their classroom also needing their help,
- Past experience with your child's disability may be influencing how they view your child,
- Lack of knowledge about your child's particular challenges or confidence about what to do,
- When someone is not a parent, it can be harder for them to appreciate parenting challenges, let alone special needs parenting.

For parents, some factors that may be unseen are:

- Your concern for your child's long-term and transitional future,

- Your insecurity about knowing what to do,
- Past experiences with how you were parented
- Past experience with your own education
- Past experiences with other educators regarding your child,
- Unresolved grief about your child's limitations.
- Share openly what may be under the surface for you. You might be surprised that this can make others more empathetic.
- We want others to have an open mind and understand our child's strengths and weaknesses. This is what every person wants; to be understood and respected.
- To best understand what is under the surface for others, make a simple statement or ask a question like: It must be challenging to teach a child who often is off task and not paying attention.

Pause, observe, and listen to others. Their actions and words will tell you about themselves and will give you clues to their views on educating your child. People like to be asked about their opinions and views. It can only help to learn another person's perspective.

CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

When anyone who is a part of a team arrives with a fixed position, this will impact their ability to be flexible. Ideally, the purpose of a team is that many people working together bring expertise and



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knowledge to creatively resolve problems. How can you identify if you or someone else is being a fixed or flexible participant?

Understand the difference between a position and an interest.

A fixed position:

- Is one way to solve a problem,
- Has a very narrow focus.

A flexible interest:

- Is a broadly defined need,
- Can be met in several ways.

An interest may be wanting your child to be respected, master skills, or be safe. A position could be wanting a one on one aide, a particular reading program, or a specific amount of time in speech therapy. When the team can identify interests the result will be more flexible and creative problem solving.

To help brainstorm, have someone write down all ideas in a way that others can see them, without passing judgement.

Describe situations as if you are describing a photograph. This keeps your descriptions objective. Instead of saying “Josh hates to write” say “During free writing time, Josh sits at his desk and looks out the window and writes no more than one sentence.”

Ask questions to help others be more specific. Often when others use general statements such as

“Josh is a delight” we miss the opportunity for more detailed information. By asking follow-up questions the other person may then give a more descriptive answer about how Josh is successful in the classroom.

Listen carefully to the ideas of others and keep an open mind. Let others finish speaking.

With a common interest in your child’s needs, look at ways to agree to some ideas, rule out others or combine parts of two ideas into one.

Work hard to avoid “Yes but...” thinking. Instead, try “Yes, and...” For example say “I like that idea. Can we also...?”

In these times of scarce resources, creative problem solving and respectful communication are free valuable resources that can result in new and innovative ideas for your child.

APEC IS HERE TO HELP

APEC provides free training, information, and consultation to families. Visit our training calendar for more information about learning opportunities at www.alabamaparentcenter.com or call our center.

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