

# Communication: It's Not Just for Grownups!

Communicating with your children on a regular basis is essential to their growth. Having frequent, ongoing conversations will help children to develop good relationships with others and maintain a more positive outlook on life. It also teaches kids how to put their feelings into words and helps with developing healthy coping, problem solving, and negotiation skills.

Because children are still forming their language and communication skills, conversations with them may not always be linear or follow the organized patterns we become used to as adults. However, if you pay attention, you may pick up on a lot of important information. Here's how to get the most out of your conversations with your child:



- **Be available.** Set aside at least ten minutes a day to talk with your child. Find a time that works for both of you and make it “your” time to catch up with each other. If sitting down for dinner together on a regular basis is difficult, try scheduling this time for when you do the dishes, take the dog for a walk, or just before bedtime.
- **Listen.** If your child knows that you are really listening, he or she will be more likely to talk to you about important issues. It's important for kids to know that you love them and will be there for them, no matter what.
- **Show empathy and understanding.** Children often struggle with the feeling that adults don't understand them. In part, this is because they are experiencing the trials and tribulations of growing up for the first time and they may find it hard to imagine that anyone else has

had similar experiences. It may be helpful to share an occasional relevant story from your own childhood experiences, but be careful to not make the conversation about you. Stay focused on your child's concerns and the problem at hand.

- **Demonstrate respect.** You may not always agree with how your child reacts to events or feel like she or he blows things out of proportion. Remember that what may seem trivial to you may be very important to your child. Whether it's the intricacies of a favorite game or the first big fight with a best friend, make sure your child knows that whatever he or she wants to talk about is of interest to you.
- **Restate and reframe.** When your child is upset, it may be difficult to pinpoint why, even with careful listening. Try restating what you have heard and ask if you understood it correctly. If your child is stuck in negative or catastrophic thinking, try imagining other outcomes or focusing on what is most likely to happen rather than worst-case scenarios.
- **Be a good role model.** Your words, tone of voice, and actions should model the behavior you want your child to emulate. If you yell, your child will yell, and if you complain, your child will think that's a good way to deal with problems. Your example sets the tone.
- **Apologize.** It's important to apologize if you make a mistake or say something that you shouldn't have out of anger or frustration. Acknowledging your mistakes will clear the lines of communication and keep small hurts from turning into big ones. Explain that learning how to communicate better is a lifelong process and encourage your child to keep working at it just like you're trying to do.