



# *Families Matter!*

## **WINNING WAYS TO TALK WITH YOUR CHILDREN**

**Good communication helps children develop confidence, feelings of self-worth, and good relationships with others.**

It makes life with them more pleasant and helps them grow into adults who have good feelings about themselves and others.

**Communication is what we say and how we say it.**

We communicate with looks (frowns or smiles), with actions (slaps or hugs), with silence (warm or cold) as well as with words (kind or unkind). Adults usually don't have difficulty communicating with children when it simply involves giving directions on how to wash dishes or explaining the danger of cars, but they do have trouble 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

**Here are some winning ways to talk to children and teens.**

Try these ideas! Remember, what works well for one person may not work for another.



**Use kind words to encourage and build up.**

**Kind words bring happy results!**

They give children more self-confidence and encourage them to behave better, try harder, and achieve more. They also communicate love and respect.

Suppose a 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 feelings. Or you can say, "Here is a sponge. Please wipe up the milk." — with happy results.

**Use "I-messages" to communicate your thoughts and feelings.**

**"I-messages" are statements of fact.**

They tell children how their behavior makes you feel. Often children don't know how their behavior affects others. "I-messages" are much more effective

than "you-messages" when a child misbehaves.

**Which sounds better?**

**"I" Message**

- I need help picking things up now.
- I don't feel like playing that game when I'm tired.
- I 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 surely made a mess.
- You're a pest.
- You ought to be ashamed.
- You'd better shut-up!
- You're dumb.

**Use "you messages" to reflect a child's ideas and feelings.**

**"You messages" describe children's feelings and encourage them to express troublesome feelings.**

When children are allowed to express bad feelings freely, they learn how to handle them in healthy ways. Hiding bad feelings is self-destructive. Bad feelings do not disappear: they can lead to self-hate, headaches, ulcers, and violent actions.



**Examples:**

- You are sad because your dog died.
- You are upset because you didn't win the game.
- You're mad because Jenny wouldn't let you play with her.

**Remember:**

Actions can be labeled good or bad, but not feelings. Feelings are neither good nor bad. They simply exist.

**Use door openers.**

**Door openers invite people to say more, to share ideas and feelings.**

They tell children that you are really listening and interested, that their ideas are important, and that you accept them and respect what they are saying.



**Examples:**

- Really?
- Say that again, I want to be sure I understand you.
- No kidding!

**Use more do's than don'ts.**

**Tell a child what to do rather than what not to do.**

Using "Do's" rather than "Don'ts" is very difficult, especially if you already have the "Don't" habit. 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.

**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.



**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 to children as you talk to your friends.**

If you talk to children with as much consideration as you do with your friends, you will be on the way to great relationships.

**Make important requests firmly.**

**Speak as if you mean it, and give a reason why a child must do this thing at this particular time.**

A request made in a wishy-washy manner lets a child think you do not really care whether or not you are obeyed.

**Children can think about only one thing at a time.**

When they are involved in play, it is hard for them to shift their attention to you. Also, they don't like being interrupted in their play any more than you do when you are engrossed in your work.



### **Talk with (not at) children.**

Talking "at" a child is 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 child cannot talk at the adult's level.**

But no one, including a young child, likes to be talked "at." You may talk "at" the family dog, but try to talk "with" your child.

**Talking "with" children is a two-way conversation — speaking yourself, and then listening to what they have to say.**

Forming the habit of talking "with" children rather than "at" them will be especially helpful as they grow into the teen years.

### **Listen attentively.**

**Get rid of distractions and pay attention to what your child is saying.**

At times adults may need to stop whatever they are doing and listen to a child. It is difficult to run a vacuum

cleaner, cook dinner or read the paper, and at the same time, pay close attention to what a child is saying.

**Do not pretend you are listening when you aren't.**

If you are busy — talking on the telephone or entertaining guests — tell a child, "I'm busy now, but let's talk about that later." Then be sure to follow through.

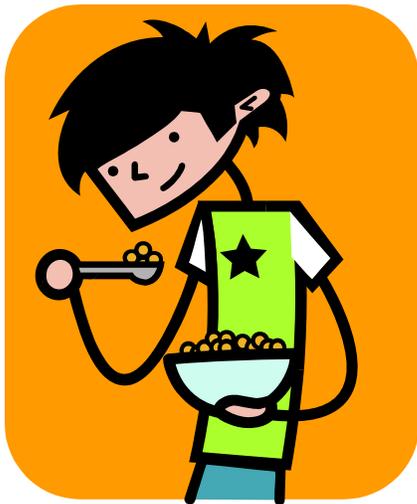
**"Tune in" to what children are saying and thinking.**

When children are asked, "What's wrong with grown-ups?" many children comment on parents' listening habits.

"Grown-ups never really listen to what children have to say," one boy said. "They always decide ahead of time what they are going to answer. Sometimes I never get to finish what I'm saying before they answer."

"Grown-ups interrupt children all the time and think nothing of it," another child said.





<b>When Adults:</b>	<b>A Child Feels:</b>
Threaten	I don't matter.
Command	I'm bad.
Preach	You don't like me.
Lecture	I can't do anything right.

**It's important to accept children just as they are, without necessarily approving of their behavior.**

**Children need to feel that they are important, and special, and loved!**

When a parent spends special time with a child, the child's spirit grows and he or she develops a sense of worth. Children need practical examples of your love. In most cases, the time spent with a child will speak much louder than any words ever can.



**Communicate acceptance.**

**When children know they are accepted, they are able to grow, to change, and to feel good about themselves.**

Children are then better able to get along well with others.

**Accepting children just as they are makes it easy to communicate with them.**

Those who feel accepted will be more likely to share their feelings and problems.

Have a good month!

[Patricia Tanner Nelson](#), Ed.D.  
 Extension Family & Human  
 Development Specialist  
 ptnelson@udel.edu

This newsletter has been adapted from information prepared by Dr. Betsy R. Schenck, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and Dr. Herbert G. Lingren, Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska.

Suggested citation: Nelson, P.T. (Ed) (2007). *Winning Ways To Talk With Children. Families Matter! A Newsletter Series for Parents of School-Age Youth.* Newark, DE: Cooperative Extension, University of Delaware

NO.20-REV0707

Look inside for winning ways to talk with your children:

- Using skills that will increase your child's confidence and self-worth.
- What's an "I-message"? When to use "You messages"?
- Using "door openers"
- Listening "actively"



Want more information? Visit the Extension Cord at <http://ag.udel.edu/extension/fam/> - - Extending the University to YOU!

Or contact your county Extension office: New Castle: 461 Wyoming Rd., Newark, DE 19716-1303, Tel. 302-831-8965; Kent: 69 Transportation Circle, Dover, DE 19901, Tel. 302-730-4000; Elbert N. & Ann V. Carvel Sussex Research & Education Center, 16483 County Seat Hwy., Georgetown, DE 19947, Tel. 302-856-7303.

Cooperative Extension Education in Agriculture and Home Economics, University of Delaware, Delaware State University and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating. Distributed in furtherance of Acts of Congress of March 8 and June 30, 1914. It is the policy of the Delaware Cooperative Extension System that no person shall be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of race, color, sex, disability, age or national origin.