

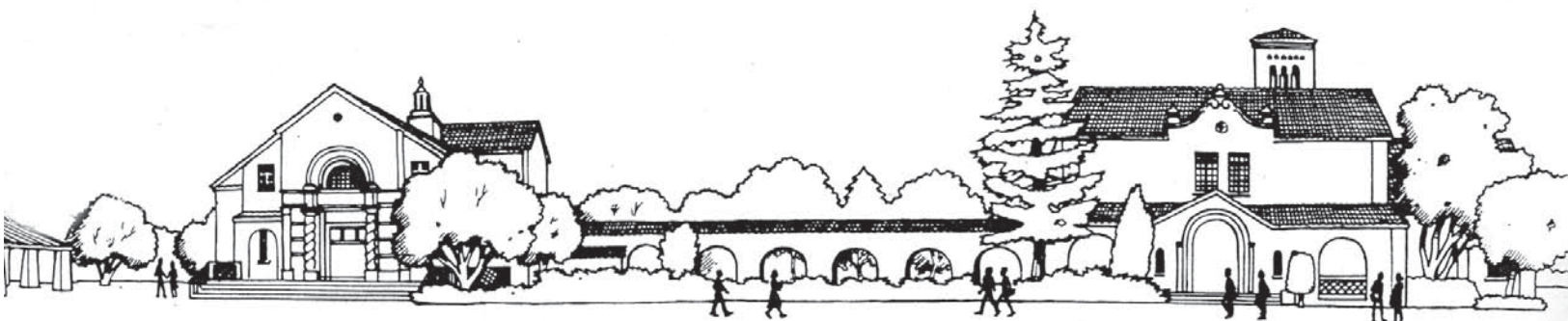
4. Six Tricks of Communicating

Many arguments and problems within families arise not from the substance of a disagreement but from the way we communicate about it. That process includes both the words we use and the “non-verbal” communication that goes with them — how something is said.

There also are unspoken messages: What is left out, or implied without being said? **What someone hears may not be what the other person intended.**

We often communicate most when we are upset and neglect to convey good, positive feelings to those close to us.

- Think about the purpose of your message.** You don't have to say things that will hurt a relationship. **Send positive messages freely; select negative ones carefully** and present them with care at a time when they are most likely to be accepted.
- State negative messages verbally** — save the non-verbal as a topping for positive words: a smile, nod, pat on the back.
- Rephrase negative messages into a request for positive changes**, stated in specifics: “I would like you to do this, that and that.” Be straight and clear.
- Limit your request** to things that are important and possible to achieve.
- Check out the reception.** You can only be sure someone has understood you when they can state the message back to you — and vice versa. They can think about the response later; they should first hear the correct message.
- Avoid talking more than a minute at a time.** Make a single point and check the reception before going to the next point.



LifeSkills Program

‘Effective Listening’ Is the Quiet Secret

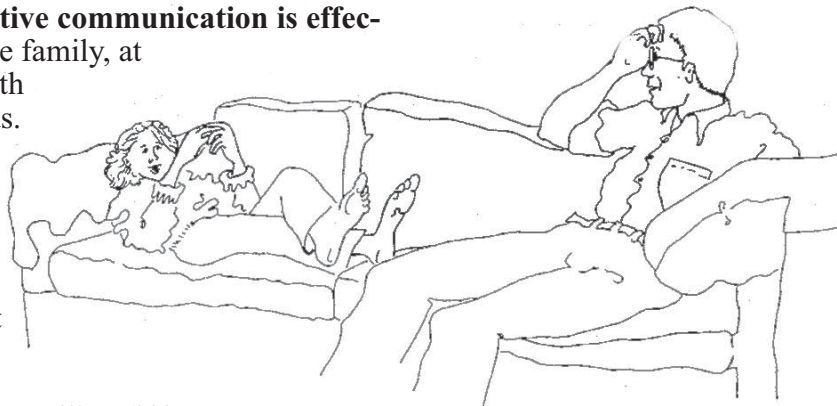
Almost everyone feels good when they have been listened to, “taken seriously” enough to have someone really focus on what they’re saying. Conversely, the absence of “someone to talk to” (meaning a good listener) can cause serious problems in people’s lives, affect how they feel about themselves and others, and contribute to feelings of anger and hostility.

The secret of effective communication is effective listening — in the family, at school, at work, or with roommates and friends.

What is “effective listening”? Just that — it’s what you like someone else to do when you’re talking. It means showing that you’re paying attention, such as looking

at the person, nodding, smiling (if it’s not a terribly serious conversation), perhaps sitting down across from or near the person.

The responses can include requests to the other person to repeat a point on which you’re not clear, indicating you really want to understand what the person is conveying. When you think you understand, **it is important to rephrase the message you heard and repeat it to the person so he or she can agree with or correct it. This is the ultimate confirmation that you heard and understood.**



—Kate Lemmon

Another central element to good listening is to suspend being judgmental and disagreeing **until you fully understand what the other person is saying**— whether parent or young person.

Many arguments stem from someone being trigger happy with a disagreement, cutting the other person off with a “That’s ridiculous!” or other shut-down comment before hearing the full message, and without even trying to understand it.

The listener should wait to disagree until (1) the message has been delivered fully and (2) the listener has acknowledged receiving it. But think in advance how you voice that disagreement —

including non-verbal messages. What is it that you want to accomplish?

A good starting point for being a good listener is to **take a moment all by yourself and think about those people closest to you.**

Consider how, in so many ways, their lives are entirely different from yours. A shared, compassionate understanding of those different life experiences and feelings is a rare gift.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Messages: Which Are Stronger?

Many problems arise out of the process of communication rather than disagreement about the substance of the message or situation itself. Someone says or does something, or acts in a non-verbal way to convey a certain message, and others react to that message.

“Actions speak louder than words,” is an old saying. Modern psychologists would say that if there is a conflict between a verbal and a non-verbal message, **the non-verbal message is the one that is believed.**

Also, when someone gives a conflicting message (positive words but negative “body language,” for example) he or she can avoid accepting responsibility for the negative message if called on it.

An excellent rule of thumb is to **try to limit your non-verbal messages to positive ones** (a smile, nod, pat on the back) and **always state negative messages verbally and with a specific purpose or request in mind.**

Messages once sent cannot be

recalled, and hence all messages should be launched with care.

Communication should be for a purpose. You don’t *have* to say things that will be bad for your relationships. People do well to send out positive things they think or feel about others, and to select very, *very* carefully from among the negative things — and then design with care how those are presented.

They should be phrased as a request for a positive, specific, timely action, not as criticisms of past actions.

Why Some Teenagers Don't Confide Much

“Why is it so hard for your own kids to talk to you about what’s going on in their lives? I learn a lot more about my kids from listening to them talk to a neighbor, an uncle or someone else than I get from them directly.”

This comment drew nods of agreement at a LifeSkills seminar on family interactions.

Another parent in the audience suggested that perhaps young persons are hesitant to open up because of some past experience — namely, a **“YOU DID WHAT?”** reaction to the sharing of some confidence or experience. This reaction can only come from a parent — almost never from a neighbor, aunt or uncle or someone else with no authority over the young person.

There is a huge difference between “interested” questions and interrogative questioning. It takes time to build trust.

Parents are often in the difficult role of having to assert authority over their children, usually with little training and no commonly accepted standards of what their responses should be (or “where to draw the line”). And no parent can have complete control over a child’s behavior. Strong influence, yes, but that’s a different dynamic — one that calls for consistent listening, cooperation, role-modeling and mutual understanding AS WELL AS setting and holding reasonable limits.

Young persons should remember, too, that it’s not all that simple being a parent.

Parents who feel secure in their authority act not as equals but as caring parents with whom the young persons will continue relationships for many years beyond adolescence.

Those who develop a genuine, non-judgmental interest in actions and opinions of their children, and who respect their confidences (even when angry), will find doors of trust open to them.

A “No-fault” Communication Policy?

One of the most common traps for family interactions is the incredible amount of energy, time and emotion we spend trying to figure out who was (or is) at fault about something.

Why bother? Think about it. Who needs to know? What difference does it make?

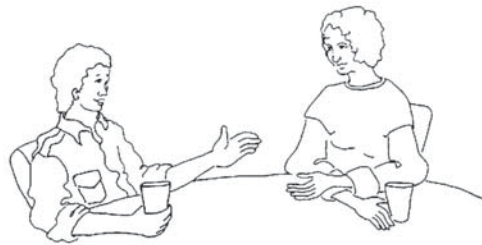
“Well,” one might say, “we need to know what went wrong so we can figure out how to prevent it next time.”

True, but that’s a very different matter than assigning blame or fault-finding with any specific family member.

The important point to address is the existing situation and **what specifically can be done to improve it**, phrased as positively as possible — and limited to one or two at a time.

The real reason to try the “no-fault” policy is that **the other way just doesn’t work**. People get defensive and angry, sometimes hurt, and they almost **never get to the stage of figuring out how to prevent a situation from recurring in the future**.

The key, again, is to think about where you want to go, and what’s the best way to get there.



Teasing and Sarcasm Can Really Hurt

Two common ways people in families communicate — frequent teasing and using sarcasm — can do real damage to individuals and family processes.

At least we should be aware of the “hidden message” buried in each of those patterns:

Teasing is a veiled form of anger or aggression. It may be fun, or funny, but how does it leave a person feeling? And how often does it lead to angry fights? Ask yourself: “What is my real message?”

Sarcasm is almost always a defense. It can be witty and clever — but it usually is reserved for use against someone you really care about (and are vulnerable to).

To blunt it, try being direct: “It makes me feel bad when you are sarcastic.”

Be patient in seeking changes.

Where to Turn...

There are excellent community resources available for immediate, confidential (anonymous if you want) help and advice: **Teenline** and **Parental Stress Hotline**. If needed, they can refer you to a counseling or assistance service most appropriate for your or your family’s needs.

Teenline (650) 327-TEEN
Parental Stress (650) 327-3333

Using LifeSkills

The information in this publication can make a real difference in your life — but only if you read it and share it. Here are two ideas about how you can make most effective use of the concepts.

1. **Pass it on** — Share it with friends and family members. (It probably works best if you don’t force it on anyone — just leave it around or make a comment without being “holier than thou.”)

2. **Leave it around** — Once you’ve read it, just lay it around the house. Others will check it out, maybe without your even knowing about it. Just leave it on the kitchen or dining-room table, or a coffee table, in the bathroom or pinned to a bulletin board.

You Get What You Give

This LifeSkills program is only as helpful as you and those in your family make it.

It is not enough to “KNOW” how to communicate well; you must actually DO it. Just as with exercising, studying or paying bills (but a lot more fun), you need to put in the effort in order to receive the benefits.

Some ideas about getting back what you put out:



You get the most out of any commitment — a class, a job OR a relationship—if *you take responsibility for giving it your best effort*. As long as you have to deal with members of your family, why not make it as pleasant as possible? The more you can turn routine exchanges into expressions of appreciation, the doing of favors and demonstrations of support, the more fun it will be for you — regardless of the response.



Studies have shown that people are much more pleasant and attentive to strangers than to family members. Psychologist Lloyd Homme developed a “game” of getting people to pretend their family members and friends were long lost cousins from out of town. Try it.

Family

LifeSkills

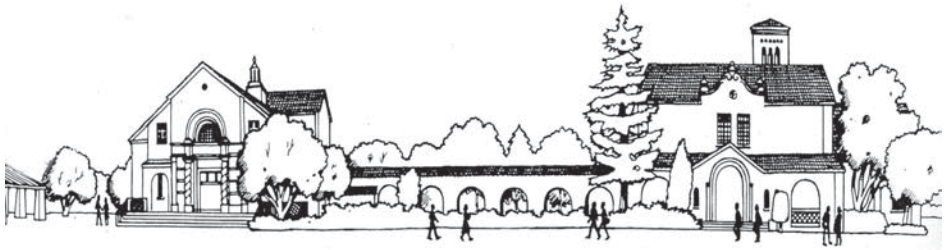
is a program to strengthen and enrich how family members interact — with the purpose of making each person and the family as a whole as psychologically strong as possible.

It was developed originally by **Palo Alto High School** and the **Palo Alto Medical Foundation** for Health Care, Research and Education, and expanded to Gunn High School.

It is now being co-sponsored by the **Palo Alto Weekly**, **Palo Alto Unified School District** and other community organizations, with major support from the **California Family Foundation**.

Six Tricks of Communicating is the fourth publication in a program designed to help students and family members interact more positively and develop stronger abilities to negotiate and communicate. Other publications and newsletters will be mailed during the school year.

—LifeSkills Planning Committee



Family

LifeSkills Program

25 Churchill Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94301

For information: (650) 329-3717

For help or Advice: (650) 327-TEEN; 327-3333

4. Six Tricks of Communicating: How Your Family Can Work Best