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Tips for Parent-Child Communication

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The American Psychological Association (APA) has lately taken an active role in helping parents communicate with their adolescent children. In this article, I will present many suggestions offered by the APA. First, let's begin by asking ourselves the following two key questions:

1. Why does my kid have a difficult time in talking with me about what's going on in his/her life?
2. How comfortable am I in initiating conversation with him/her on such sensitive (or delicate) subjects?

If you feel that your child really doesn't listen to you, add one more question to your list and that is, "What am I doing that my child doesn't listen to me?" Even if you think that the fault lies in the child, it is better to look for an explanation in your own behavior. Whatever answers you can come up with, acknowledge them to your child. This may impress on your child that you are acting in good faith and you have credentials to back it up.

Hear your child out. We often interrupt our children too soon. It's a basic rule of engagement. Hear your children's viewpoint even when it is difficult to hear and the impulse to correct them is difficult to resist. Let them finish speaking before you respond.

A significant number of teens complain that their parents are "too busy," "don't have time" or "aren't there when I want to say something." Be available to your children when they are most likely to talk. Stop whatever you're doing and listen. Never postpone the conversation. When a kid has spoken, that is the right time.

Learn about their interests such as their favorite music, movies and activities, even if you don't agree with them because they are great talking points for teens.

Soften your reactions even if you strongly disagree or disapprove of what your children are saying. Otherwise, they may decide to never truly say what's on their mind. Kids, like adults, have a tendency to tune people out if they sound angry or defensive. Express your opinion without putting down theirs.

If you want to initiate a conversation, do it by sharing your own thinking about an issue rather than beginning with a question. An abrupt question often serves as a warning. "Why are you asking me?" "What did I do?" In a conversation, focus on your children's feelings rather than on your own.

After you hear them out, repeat what you heard them say to make sure you heard it right. Before you react one way or the other, a question such as this would be great: "How can I help you with this?" Sometimes kids want advice, other times they just want to express how they're feeling.

The British who ruled India constantly warned the Indian freedom seekers about the awful mistakes the inexperienced Indian leaders would make if they were given the power to rule. Gandhi, the chief architect of the freedom movement and father of the nation countered, "But those will be our mistakes." Kids, too, want to learn from their own choices. As long as the mistakes are not dangerous, let them.

Resources for Families

It isn't easy being a parent these days. Two great resources are available for parents for all ages. The Family Resources Center of Sheboygan County and Ozaukee Family Services offers parenting classes, support groups, activities and community connections. Their websites are as follows:

Family Resource Center of Sheboygan: www.familyresourcesheboygan.org

Ozaukee Family Services: www.ozaukeefamilyservices.org

The elementary and middle schools have Fall catalogs available for the FRC.

Recognizing Individual Talents and Abilities

Every child is unique, and discovering your own child's special talents and abilities can be one of the most exciting aspects of being a parent.

Look at what a child's capabilities are today rather than what you think they will be in the future. Focus on what Johnny or Mary can do now – and how you as a parent can encourage emerging talent.

This approach is generally more successful than trying to predict or control what a child will do in adult life. Even though a fifth grader may show an interest in art, music or science, her interests may quickly change as she grows older.

While we may realize that each individual is unique, it is sometimes difficult to remember. We are constantly tempted to place people in little pigeonholes, to label and categorize them. In the process we inhibit development of individual talents and abilities.

When a parent sees a child struggling with math, for example, the parent might think, "Mary is just like her Aunt Sally," or, "Johnny is having exactly the same problems I did."

The truth of the matter is that Mary is not Aunt Sally, and it would be quite impossible for Johnny to be like anyone else but himself. When Mary is allowed to be Mary and Johnny is allowed to be Johnny, each of them will be in a position to develop their own individual talents and abilities.

Two things often inhibit a child's development of individual talents. These are saturation and discouragement.

Saturation is when a child gets bored from focusing too much attention on something. For example, Johnny gets ten more math problems to do because he did the first ten so quickly. To him, this seems like a form of punishment. His abilities would have been challenged by giving him more difficult tasks appropriate to his talent. Or, if Mary has musical ability, she may develop a total dislike for music when parents or teachers place too much emphasis on over-development or perfection of this talent.

Discouragement happens when a challenge is too difficult or when only the end product (rather than the effort) is evaluated. Unfortunately, children are often described in terms of what they cannot do, rather than what they can do.

Children are sometimes labeled as physically handicapped, or mentally retarded, or learning disabled - all of which describe a handicapping condition – even though they may be good at math or sharing or singing or helping.

Parents are in a unique position to observe their children's special talents and abilities. They can make sure their child is challenged and given encouragement for effort, which is the best environment for talents and abilities to develop.

First Step to Success: A Positive Attitude

By the time a child gets to sixth grade, how well he does in school has a lot to do with how he feels about himself.

Success is a cycle. So is failure. When a child succeeds, he feels good. Feeling good brings more success. When he fails, though, he feels bad about himself and his abilities. His negative attitude leads to more failure.

If your child seems unhappy, or if there's a change in his behavior that you don't like, or if he starts bring home failing grades, he might be on a negative cycle. Make it a point to find out what is going on. There are many things you can do to help your sixth grader get on a positive cycle and stay there.

- Praise the positive. Everyone in the world does something well, whether it's funning fast, making up funny stories, saying the multiplication tables or identifying birdsongs.
- Be actively interested and involved in your child's learning. Provide one-to-one help when there's a new concept to learn or difficulty to overcome.
- Encourage the child with positive attitudes and comments about learning and school.
- Create a pleasant study area and insist on homework time every night. A desk with a good light and a comfortable chair is ideal; the kitchen table will do if every one knows it is study time and distractions (television, radio and loud conversations) are either avoided or eliminated.
- Check homework for accuracy, clarity, neatness, completion. Praise these things when they're well done.
- Show an interest in tests, reports, papers, things that happened at school. Listen!
- Provide a good well-balanced diet, and insist on plenty of sleep every night.

Learning Styles are Personal and Individual

Parents of seventh graders often wonder how their children are doing in school. They think: Sheila seems to be getting a lot of homework lately and doesn't seem to understand what she is reading or how to do her math.

If Sheila is really having problems at school, she is probably even more upset than her parents – even if she doesn't show it. She may think: "I'm not as smart as the others. They don't have any trouble with schoolwork. What's the matter with me? What's the use of trying anyway?"

It's not fun to have to work at something you think you can't do. Most people who feel this way either quit or develop an attitude of outward indifference.

Progress varies

Many worries about school performance come from the belief that learning is like riding in a jet plane where the student taxis down the runway, gains speed and rises gracefully into the air.

But intellectual development is really more like a ride in a sailing ship. Sometimes the young person goes as fast as the wind. At other times, when the wind dies, she stops dead still. There are even times when she must go backward until she can once again turn around and make progress.

Differences are natural

In any class, on any day, it is normal for different students to be working two years apart. In Grade 7, for instance, some students can be reading at Grade 6 while others are reading at Grade 8. This is no cause for alarm. This is normal development.

Grade 7 is a difficult year. Most students begin to have a number of different teachers. If the young person is not organized or is unsure of herself, the experience can be traumatic. And it seems that boys often have a bit more trouble with these adjustments than girls do.

Higher expectations

In Grade 7, teacher expectations change, too. Instead of asking "who, what, when, where, and how" questions, teachers ask more "Why?" questions. For the student who is still trying to get the facts straight, these harder "why" questions can be threatening and frustrating.

Parents, students, and teachers can work together to develop individual learning plans that will make Grade 7 a good and successful year. Some suggestions:

Think of intellectual development as individual. Instead of comparing one student against another, look for each person's strengths and build on them.

Use the classroom teacher as a resource of help. It would be a good idea for parents and students to meet with the teacher as early as possible in the school year. The teacher can point out areas that need work and share ideas for improvement.

Responsibility is an Acquired Skill

Why do eighth graders act irresponsibly? Probably for one or more of the following reasons:

- They didn't notice.
- They forgot.
- They procrastinated until it was too late.
- They were talked into behaving as they did.

Parents can easily help their children overcome the first three causes. If for, example, you find yourself shouting at your eighth grader for never helping around the house, you might begin by asking yourself if he or she knows exactly what things you want done. Instead of saying "Pick up your room each day," try "Put your dirty clothes in the hamper, make your bed and put your books on the shelf before you leave for school."

Make a family job chart

Sit down as a family and make a list of all the specific things that need to be done and who will do what, when. Once you have this list, make a daily calendar. Each day, as soon as a family member finishes a task, he or she checks it off the list. By developing this as a family list, parents reinforce by example good behavior on the part of their children.

Dealing with irresponsible behavior

Another cause of irresponsible behavior – being talked into doing undesirable things – is harder to handle. First parents need to know who is doing the talking.

Is it her peers? Can she stand up to these others without fear of being isolated?

Once parents know the source of the behavior, they can more effectively deal with it. If the behavior is an attention-getting act, it is best to ignore it as much as possible. Then, whenever the young person does something responsible, pour on the compliments. In this way, parents reinforce the positive without highlighting the negative.

Peer pressure more difficult

Peer pressure is not difficult to handle. What is talked about and decided upon in the safety of the family circle is not ways easily carried through in outside situations. Yet, a sympathetic and understanding ear can help set most situations right. By talking about what it feels like to have someone pressuring you to do something and by looking at various alternatives, the young person can learn how to handle similar situations in the future.

Given the proper opportunity, young people can be responsible. By focusing on the young person's capabilities parents can foster developing responsibility.