



Part 3

Fostering Communication with your Child

From 6 to 12 years old



In the last issue, we talked about the importance of fostering good communication with your toddler—and how it is the basis of self-esteem. In this issue, we will talk about Middle Childhood (6-12 years). The importance of fostering good communication continues as your child's brain undergoes rapid changes. Your child is now able to remember, conceptualize, categorize, deduce, reflect and engage in the problem-solving process. All of this involves you, but your child is now also being influenced by extended family, teachers, friends and the media. Your child is working hard at deciphering everything. Luckily, your child is still looking to you as their primary role model (though they may act and dress like their favourite Marvel character). Your role as parent, as it has in the past, continues to be central to fostering good communication and is the groundwork for a lifelong bond of closeness.



One of the many abilities your child is developing in middle childhood is the ability to tell you their feelings. This little miracle is now able to share their vulnerabilities with you, because feelings are vulnerabilities. When your child opens their heart to you, it is a chance to bond on a level that is precious. Your reaction is critical to not just fostering good communication but will have far-reaching implications on trust and their ability to connect with others, including a life partner. Remember, these interactions are the foundations upon which their self-esteem is built—because your reaction impacts that.



Engage in
active
listening

When we share a feeling, we are leaving ourselves vulnerable to the reaction of others. As adults, we understand that all too well because we have a lifetime of experience. Your child does not have that, so they come to you with an open heart and trust that you can fix and/or understand the emotion; that you can make them feel better. That's why it is so important that you stop what you're doing and listen. If you can't, take a moment, make eye contact and explain to your child that what they said sounds really important, apologize for not having time to deal with it now, and set aside some time later in the day, to talk about it. Then, listen closely and read between the lines. This is called active listening.



Sometimes, it requires a little detective work. Parents have a tendency to want to make the distress go away, especially when preoccupied. We can end up trying to minimize and that's not ideal. Ideally, we need to remember that our children and their emotional health, are the priority. Remember that your little one has mustered up all of their courage to share with you something important. If they want to talk



about something, it's because it's bothering them. So, it's important to take the time to figure out what's happening. Let's use an example to show the wonderful opportunity that is lost when we are rushed and don't take the time to listen.

Nicholas: Today, Johnny said that he didn't want to play with me anymore.

Parent: Really? Well, just ignore him, honey. You have other friends.

Take the opportunity to learn about your child

That may seem like a good way to cope, but it is not dealing with Nicholas's feelings. It is not taking the opportunity to learn about your child, his friends, his life, his world. Nor is it fostering good communication. Let's compare it to this interaction:

Nicholas: Johnny said that he didn't want to play with me anymore.

Parent: Really? How did that make you feel?

Nicholas: I don't know, sad, I guess.

Parent: Yes, I understand. I would feel sad too. It hurts when someone says that. Do you have any idea why Johnny would say that?

Nicholas: He was mad because I didn't want him to come into our bubble at recess.

Parent: Oh, I see. Is it possible that Johnny thought that you didn't want to play with him?

Nicholas: But I do. It's just that our teacher said that we have to play with just the kids from our class.

Parent: Oh, ok, I see. Sounds like a misunderstanding. It sounds like you were just trying to follow the rules but Johnny's feelings got hurt.

Nicholas: Yeah.

Parent: What could we do to explain that to Johnny?

Nicholas: I guess I could call him and explain...

Parent: That's a great idea honey. Let's do that.

Validate your child's emotion

Remember, when a child makes a statement that is more or less out of the blue, it's a hint that there is something more to the story. It's also safe to say that there's an emotion that they're struggling with. Ask how they feel about the event. They may be able to identify the emotion, but it's not always the case. Sometimes, you have to dig a little deeper. If they can't name the emotion, it's fine to help them identify it. Eventually, they become better at identifying their feelings. This is a good thing—and the younger they are when they can do this, the better. In our example, Nicholas was able to say that he felt sad. By responding that you too, would be sad in a situation like that, you are giving him permission to have that feeling. This is called validation. Validating means that you agree with what your child is feeling. You can say something like "I would feel sad too" or "yeah that's really hard. I think I would feel sad too."

Once you acknowledge the feeling, you can try to figure out what happened. It's good to ask lots of questions to get as many details as possible. Once you have formed an idea of what happened, then you can go into problem-solving mode. It is always best to include your child in problem-solving. This teaches them lifelong skills of how to cope.

Include your child in problem solving

Notice in the example above, the parent involves Nicholas in the problem solving. This gives Nicholas a sense of power that he can resolve the situation; and this is so important to his self-confidence and self-esteem. Stay with Nicholas as he works through this. Your physical presence, your touch, reassure him and instill confidence. Sit with him as he makes the call and guide him if you have to, about how to express his feelings. By the way, this will help Johnny with *his* feelings as well.

In this scenario, we saw concretely how the exchange between Nicholas and his parent became an opportunity to foster good communication. It was also an opportunity to help Nicholas process and understand his world, in line with the developmental work mentioned in the beginning. Nicholas worked hard at remembering the event, conceptualizing the misunderstanding, and deducing / categorizing it as an event that caused himself and Johnny to feel sadness. Your interaction with Nicholas will provide him with an opportunity to reflect on his behaviour which will guide him going forward; and you coached him on problem-solving. Amazing, and all in about 15 minutes.

Equally important, you have taught your child that you are someone safe for him to go to with his problems. You taught him that he can talk to you, he can be vulnerable, he can share experiences and you will be there to help him break down the issue, find the source of his distress and help him deal with it. It is the basis of a beautiful bond, the importance of which can not be overstated – especially as you head into the teenage years.

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