

Optimizing Your Potential as a 4-H Volunteer



Talking with Kids

Introduction

Good communication skills are taught and caught. It's important for all of us who work with young people to have good communication skills. One reason is to make sure that everyone is hearing and understanding each other. Another reason is that children who see adults communicating well will often copy this behavior.

This fact sheet identifies communication techniques you can use to help you make sure that the young people you are working with are hearing and understanding when you are working with them. These skills are not only useful when communicating with young people, but can be employed in all your interactions, including discussions with their parents.

Useful Skills

A volunteer who uses active and effective listening skills coupled with lots of respectful messages and encouragement will have gone a long

way in mastering the art of good communication with youth. These useful skills provide the foundation for building a solid relationship with young people so that you are able to handle conflicts that may arise, to effectively discipline when necessary, and to create a nurturing atmosphere that allows for young people to grow.

Children Are People, Too!

Children are people, and like most people, they respond to the way people communicate with them. Nagging, reminding, criticizing, threatening, and lecturing are communication techniques that are often ineffective and strain relationships.

The key to developing positive communication with a child is to develop a relationship based on mutual respect. This is a relationship in which each party respects the feelings and ideas of the other even though they may not always agree with each other.

Before you can develop respect for a child, you have to understand what feelings and ideas that child is expressing. This takes time and concentration.

Effective Listening

To understand someone, you need to begin by really listening to what they are saying and trying to understand what they are thinking. This requires a skill known as “Effective Listening.”

Effective listening means the willingness and ability to listen, giving the speaker your full attention, eliminating or blocking out distractions, and getting rid of any personal biases.

Let’s talk about some ways to help you be an effective listener.

Good Body Language

Effective listening isn’t only done with your ears. It includes your entire body. Good body language includes posture, such as putting yourself at the child’s eye level. You should also be very careful with your gestures and appropriate body motion. Putting your arm around the child (while likely intended to be comforting) could be misconstrued. Finally, eye contact with the speaker is always an important way to show you are listening.

Show Interest

Let the child know that you are interested in what they are saying. Use cues such as “door openers,” encouragement, and questions. Door openers invite the child to talk. For example, “You seem upset today, would you like to talk about it?”

Encouragement keeps the conversation going, like “Tell me more,” or “I see.” And ask open-ended questions like “how did you reach that decision?”

Did You Understand?

Reflective listening involves listening carefully, and then in your own words, letting the child know that you understood not only what he said, but also his feelings.

Paraphrasing is using your own words to tell the child what he just told you. For example, “If I understood you correctly, you said...”

Understanding the words is not all there is to being an effective listener. You also have to understand the feelings behind what the young person said. “You’re really nervous about tomorrow’s program,” is an example of a volunteer who has listened to the youngster’s feelings behind his words.

Children Can Clarify Thoughts

Reflective listening is a good technique to help a child work out a problem, because it helps them clarify what they are saying.

An example is “It sounds as though you are angry about what happened.” The key is to focus on the child’s feelings. When reflective listening is used, a child feels as if he or she is important and someone cares.

Encouragement

There are some other techniques that you will want to employ in your communications with young people, so let’s talk now about some of these. Encouragement is very important for improving relationships between children and adults. You can encourage a young person by focusing on his or her strengths. This builds the youngster’s

self-confidence and self-esteem. It helps children believe in themselves and their abilities. Leaders and parents who offer encouragement help children accept and learn from mistakes; this helps children develop the courage to be imperfect.

Behaviors to Eliminate

To become more encouraging, try to reduce or eliminate some of these behaviors that each of us has to some degree:

Negative expectations – Expectations are communicated by what we say and do. Children can sense these, and usually behave the way we expect them to. If we believe a child will fail at a difficult task, they probably will.

Unreasonably high standards – Sometimes we may set standards that are impossible to reach. Some of us do it to ourselves, and often pass it on to the children we work with. We may expect them to do everything well and let them know that whatever they do is never as good as it could have been.

Promoting competition among youth - We are usually unaware when we are promoting competition among children. We praise the successful child and ignore or criticize the unsuccessful one. Comparisons may be expressed by gestures or facial expressions. These often-unintentional gestures can trigger competition as effectively as a comment. Think about the last time you may have been surprised or hurt by someone's gesture or facial expression, no matter how unintentional it may have been.

Over-ambition -- This attitude may influence children to avoid doing

anything that they are not certain to be tops at.

Being aware of these behaviors that often are misconstrued by the children we work with will go along way in helping you have positive interactions.

Encouraging Attitudes

Encouraging attitudes and behavior can build children's self-confidence. Try to be more encouraging in your interactions with children.

Accept children as they are -- not as they could be. If we want children to see themselves as worthwhile, we must accept them with all their imperfections.

Dwelling on their shortcomings will not help them improve -- It is vital to let them know they are valued no matter how they perform.

Ignore tattling -- Paying attention to tattling has a very discouraging effect. Youngsters often use tattling to make themselves look good or get even. As the youth leader, we should not allow ourselves to be used for this kind of negative behavior.

Do all you can to believe in the children you are working with -- so they can believe in themselves. Play down their mistakes and instead communicate confidence. Be alert to point out the positive aspects of their efforts. Avoid the temptation to interfere when a child is working through a problem. Interference sometimes communicates criticism, although that may never have been your intention.

Focus on their contributions, their assets, and their strengths -- To feel

adequate, children must feel useful and know that their contributions count. Identifying each child's talents, and suggesting ways they might use them at your meetings will go a long way in building children's self-esteem. Be sure to comment on a child's efforts as being helpful and appreciated whenever they have contributed.

By adopting an encouraging and nurturing attitude with the young people you are working with, you will help each of them to grow and develop to their fullest.

Summary

To summarize what we've learned...

Talking with kids requires that we be effective listeners that we understand not only what they are saying, but also the feelings behind what they are saying.

We also need to respect children and let them know they are appreciated, that we have confidence in them.

Finally we need to remember that encouragement helps build children's self-confidence, learn from their mistakes, and develops the courage for them to be imperfect.

Begin to use these good communication skills in your next interaction with young people.

References

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