Effective Communication with Children

In addition to having a variety of strategies that are designed to motivate children toward appropriate behavior, parents are best equipped to foster the healthy development of their children when they are able to create an atmosphere of healthy dialogue. Effective parent-child communication is the basis of positive parent-child interactions and high self-esteem in children. Furthermore, effective communication between parents and children prevents problematic behavior and helps children understand how to interact effectively with others. Thomas Gordon (1975) developed a valuable model for parent-child communication that has been used in various parenting programs for over 30 years. This approach consists of the strategies of problem ownership, active listening and I-messages.

Problem Ownership

Knowing when to use the techniques of active listening or I-messages depends on the ability to sort out “who has the problem” when a problem has arisen in a relationship. The ability to identify problem ownership prevents parents from blaming their children for problems that have arisen in the parent-child relationship or from believing that parents must assume responsibility for solving their children's troubles. To establish who owns the problem, one needs to determine who is distressed by the situation. If the child is troubled by events that have occurred or are occurring in a relationship, the child owns the problem. When the child has the problem, it is appropriate for the parent to use the technique of active listening to respond to the child's feelings. In situations in which the behaviors of the child or events in the parent-child relationship are bothersome to the parent, then the parent owns the problem. In that situation, the most effective technique to use for communicating the parent's feelings to the child is a three-part I-message.

Active Listening

Active listening is a compelling communication strategy that consists of a verbal response containing no actual message from the parent but rather a mirroring back of the child's previous expression. Basically, the parent listens for, paraphrases, and feeds back the child's previous message but the feedback is not merely a tape recording of actual words bouncing back. Instead, the parent listens to and reflects back (in the parent's own words) the feelings of the child as well as the content of the child's message the parent thinks is being expressed. It takes practice and commitment to be able to effectively use the skill of active listening. To actively listen to a child, a parent needs to listen carefully (actively) to the words the child is speaking while attending to the child's voice tone and body language. For example, a child might burst into a room, with tears in his eyes, and exclaim, "I hate my teacher!" Although the child's verbal statement, in that example, does not convey that he is upset or what happened with the teacher, the child's voice tone, body language, and tears unmistakably express both feelings and content. A parental rejoinder that reflects having actively listened to the child might be "Something happened with Mrs. Smith that made you very upset."

There are two main challenges involved in learning to use the strategy of active listening. The first challenge is the development of an affective vocabulary, which includes a range of feeling words. “Boy, you’re upset or angry” might be a helpful response to a child in some instances but a child has a varied assortment of emotions that need parental responses. For example, these might be: aggravated, irritated, embarrassed, left out, proud, happy, great, and so on. The biggest hurdle to being effective in the use of active listening, though, lies in the parent's tendency to use communication roadblocks instead of active listening. Communication roadblocks bring to a halt the free flow of problem sharing, whereas active listening communicates to children that the parent hears what has happened as well as how children feel about what has happened.

To develop skills in active listening, it is essential that parents become aware of communication roadblocks and avoid using them when the child is attempting to communicate a problem. The use of communication roadblocks by a parent results in the child feeling as if the parent has not heard, is not interested in hearing, or does not care about the child's feelings. Even when the parent avoids each of the communication roadblocks and provides accurate verbal feedback related to the child's feelings and the content of the message, the child might not feel heard if the parent's facial expression, body stance, and voice tone do not communicate warmth and understanding.

Using Active Listening to Respond to Nonproblematic Behavior

Even though active listening is a valuable strategy for letting children know that parents hear and care about the problems they express, this approach is equally effective for responding to children's efforts to convey their feelings related to positive experiences in their lives. In response to the child who runs into the room and says, "Dad, I hit a home run, today!!" the parent can send the following active listening response. "Wow, you're pretty excited about hitting a home run. Good for you!"

I-Messages

As previously explained, when the parent owns the problem, an "I-message" is used for the purpose of expressing the parent's feelings regarding the child's behavior. I-messages are not blaming; hence, they are not you messages. This is the main objective of the strategy, not to blame the child for the feelings the parent is having regarding a particular action or lack of action of the child. I-messages have three parts: (a) the feelings of the sender, (b) the unacceptable behavior of the recipient, and (c) the tangible effect of the recipient's behavior on the sender. An example of an effective three-part I-message goes something like this: "Kelly, I have a problem I would like to discuss with you" (problem ownership). "When I went into the kitchen and saw the peanut butter and jelly jars with the lids off, and the bread and milk not put away (unacceptable behavior of the recipient), I felt frustrated (feelings of the sender) because I knew that I would have to either clean up the clutter myself or ask you to do it" (tangible effect of the recipient's behavior on the sender).

Notice that the parent in this case has not sent a blaming you-message such as: "Kelly, you never clean up after yourself. Get in there and clean up that mess you made." Children and adolescents are much more likely to respond favorably to a parental I-message delivered in a warm, nonthreatening manner than to an angry-sounding, blaming you-message. When children and adolescents feel parents are criticizing their personalities (you-messages), they feel put down and misunderstood by their parents. In these cases, they are likely to respond defensively. The purpose of using I-messages is to express dissatisfaction with a child's behavior, not to attack the child. Sending a three-part I-message to inform a child of how the child's behavior affects the parent might sound as if the parent is telling the child what the child already should know. People in relationships often believe that others ought to be more considerate without being told, should know how some behavior would affect them, and so on. Even though it would be wonderful if all family members could guess how other family members feel and act accordingly, that simply does not occur in real life. People in close relationships are continuously affected by each other's behavior and do all sorts of things without considering the ways in which their actions affect the people they care about.

Although children's behavior is sometimes unacceptable to parents, the behaviors of parents (as well as siblings) often cause difficulties for children. Thus, it is important that both parents and children learn to use effective communication skills. One of the positive outcomes of the parental use of I-messages is that parents model for their children ways in which to express their feelings related to others' behaviors that their children find bothersome. When children learn to use I-messages, they have a skill that makes it easier for dealing with the annoying behaviors of other family members as well as the behaviors of peers.

Preventive I-Messages

Gordon devised the strategy of the I-message to provide parents with an effective way to address problems that arise in the parent-child relationship because these problems are often challenging for parents and are sometimes handled in ways that are hurtful to both parents and their children. I-
messages are useful as well for preventing difficulties in the relationship. As a prevention technique, parents can use I-messages to communicate their positive feelings regarding behaviors of the child that they appreciate.

Let us revisit 12-year-old Kelly and her Mom on the day after Mom used an effective I-message to tell Kelly how she felt about things being left out in the kitchen. The next day, Kelly is sitting in the living room eating her usual after-school peanut butter and jelly sandwich and drinking a glass of milk. Mom comes in the door and Kelly, who has a big smile on her face, says “Hi, Mom.” Kelly watches as Mom goes into the kitchen, because she has cleaned up after herself and is hoping Mom will notice. When Mom enters the kitchen and sees that the bread, peanut butter, jelly, and milk have all been put away, she goes back into the living room. With a warm smile, she sends her daughter a positive three-part I-message: “Kelly, when I went into the kitchen, I noticed that you had put away all the things you used to make your snack, and that you cleaned the counter as well (behaviors on the part of the recipient that have not caused a problem), I was so pleased (feelings of the sender). I really appreciate your cleaning up after yourself because that makes things easier for me” (tangible effect of child's behavior on the mother).

As a final point, when parents use I-messages to address or prevent problems, it is important that they have a friendly facial expression, a warm voice tone, and nonthreatening body language. Furthermore, it is essential that the message be specific regarding the behavior in question. Children and adolescents are often confused about what parents are trying to tell them because parents sometimes talk in generalities to their children with statements such as, “I want you to clean up after yourself,” which could mean a variety of things. An effective I-message, on the other hand, does not threaten or attack the child nor does it confuse the child. In the case of the preventive I-message, the parent actually affirms the child. Even when no problem has occurred in a particular area, parents might send I-messages to prevent unacceptable behavior in the future. An example of a preventive I-message is, “I like to know where you are when school is out so that I know that you are okay.”

Research Findings Showing the Value of Effective Parent-Child Communication

Effective parent-child communication impacts the development of children in a variety of ways at all developmental levels. An interesting illustration of the influence of parent-child communication patterns is that these verbal patterns are often reflected in the dialogues their children have with siblings and friends (Woodward & Markman, 1998). The quality of parent-child verbal exchanges also affects children's developmental outcomes. For instance, open versus problem parent-child communication has been found to be related to children's higher self-esteem and more positive coping strategies (Jackson, Bijstra, Oostra, & Bosnia, 1998). Just as effective parent-child communication is linked to positive child outcomes, ineffective parent-child communication is associated with problems in the parent-child relationship. For instance, Arnett (2004) suggests that some of the arguments that occur between parents and their adolescent children might stem from unexpressed parental concerns. Furthermore, researchers have found that when given the opportunity, children and adolescents are willing to talk to parents. As a case in point, Richardson (2004) found that most young adolescents were able to identify topics they would like to discuss with their parents including their unhappiness with parental conflict, desire for more closeness to their parents, and struggles with autonomy.