Project North Star

Family and Community Session 1

Communication Strategies to Support Social and Emotional Well-being

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Foreword

The topics for these community forums were chosen with input from a variety of stakeholders in Project North Star. We understand that these topics are significant in parenting and educating gifted children in rural areas, but that they are just a handful of important topics families, educators, and communities need to discuss when nurturing the gifts and talents of young people. **These are a tiny lens on very large topics, and are intended to be a starting point for discussion and further exploration.** Please use these forum guides in whatever way makes sense in your community, and feel welcome to use them as a template for addressing other important topics.

The contents of these guides have been chosen using a number of criteria. We asked:

- Are they relevant to people who live in rural areas?

- Are they current and/or timeless?

- Are they respectful?

- Are they universal? (Some resources reference specific cultures, regions, or traditions. We know the readings cannot be specific to every group, but do the selected resources spark important questions that are relevant to our target audience—communities, educators, and families in rural areas who are actively engaged in creating opportunities for growth for gifted and talented children?)

- Are they thought provoking?

- Can we show alternate points of view with multiple readings, in order to help start a positive dialogue?

- Are they readily available in complete form? (Most sources are available online. We felt the need to include excerpts from several books whose authors' wisdom we felt necessary to include in our work. All sources are cited.)

We understand that not all readings will ring true to all people. Please read with an open mind, and the understanding that multiple points of view are helpful, even if the specific information offered does not apply to your situation. Analyze the readings with an eye for finding similarities, differences, and commonalities of purpose to your own experience. Feel welcome to disagree respectfully, or to champion another point of view with equal respect.

The content of these sessions are not intended to reflect the opinions or beliefs of the Project North Star staff, contractors, consultants, or participants. In fact, resources were chosen with an eye to presenting multiple points of view, with the intent of providing a lot of scope for conversation.

Above all, the Project North Star team applauds you for engaging in discussions that bridge the divide often found between education, family, and community. We know that this collaborative spirit is very often a strength of rural communities, and is something we seek to share with others. We sincerely thank you for your contributions to this work.

Suggested Reading #1

Families First—Keys to Successful Family Functioning: Communication

By Rick Peterson

Virginia Tech, Virginia Cooperative Extension, and Virginia State University

Family Communication

Family communication refers to the way verbal and non-verbal information is exchanged between family members (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Communication involves the ability to pay attention to what others are thinking and feeling. In other words, an important part of communication is not just talking, but listening to what others have to say.

Communication within the family is extremely important because it enables members to express their needs, wants, and concerns to each other. Open and honest communication creates an atmosphere that allows family members to express their differences as well as love and admiration for one another. It is through communication that family members are able to resolve the unavoidable problems that arise in all families.

Just as effective communication is almost always found in strong, healthy families, poor communication is usually found in unhealthy family relationships. Marriage and family therapists often report that poor communication is a common complaint of families who are having difficulties. Poor communication is unclear and indirect. It can lead to numerous family problems, including excessive family conflict, ineffective problem solving, lack of intimacy, and weak emotional bonding.

Researchers have discovered a strong link between communication patterns and satisfaction with family relationships (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). In fact, one researcher discovered that the more positively couples rated their communication, the more satisfied they were with their relationship five and a half years later (Markman, 1981).

Poor communication is also associated with an increased risk of divorce and marital separation and more behavioral problems in children.

Instrumental and Affective Communication

Communication can be divided into two different areas: instrumental and affective. Instrumental communication is the exchange of factual information that enables individuals to fulfill common family functions (e.g., telling a child that he/she will be picked up from school at a specific time and location). Affective communication is the way individual family members share their emotions with one another (e.g., sadness, anger, joy).

Some families function extremely well with instrumental communication, yet have great difficulty with affective communication. Healthy families are able to communicate well in both areas.

Affective communication refers to how individual family members share their emotions with one another.

Clear vs. Masked and Direct vs. Indirect Communication

Communication can be clear or masked and direct or indirect (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, 1993). Clear communication occurs when messages are spoken plainly and the content is easily understood by other family members. Masked communication occurs when the message is muddied or vague.

Communication is direct if the person spoken to is the person for whom the message is intended. In contrast, communication is indirect if the message is not directed to the person for whom it is intended.

Four Styles of Communication

Epstein et al. (1993) have identified the following four styles of communication.

Clear and Direct Communication

Clear and direct communication is the most healthy form of communication and occurs when the message is stated plainly and directly to the appropriate family member. An example of this style of communication is when a father, disappointed about his son failing to complete his chore, states, "Son, I'm disappointed that you forgot to take out the trash today without my having to remind you."

Clear and Indirect Communication

In this second style of communication, the message is clear, but it is not directed to the person for whom it is intended. Using the previous example, the father might say, "It's disappointing when people forget to complete their chores." In this message the son may not know that his father is referring to him.

Masked and Direct Communication

Masked and direct communication occurs when the content of the message is unclear, but directed to the appropriate family member. The father in our example may say something like, "Son, people just don't work as hard as they used to."

Masked and Indirect Communication

Masked and indirect communication occurs when both the message and intended recipient are unclear. In unhealthy family relationships, communication tends to be very masked and indirect. An example of this type of communication might be the father stating, "The youth of today are very lazy."

Keys to Building Effective Family Communication

There are many things that families can do to become more effective communicators and in turn to improve the quality of their relationships. Families can improve their communication skills by following some suggestions for building effective family communication.

Communicate Frequently

One of the most difficult challenges facing families today is finding time to spend together. According to a recent Wall Street Journal survey, 40% of the respondents stated that lack of time was a greater problem for them than lack of money (Graham & Crossan, 1996).

With our busy schedules, it is difficult to find sufficient time to spend with one another in meaningful conversation. It is extremely important for families to make time to communicate. Talk in the car; turn the TV off and eat dinner together; schedule informal or formal family meetings to talk about important issues that affect your family; and talk to your children at bedtime. There are many creative ways to make time to communicate with other family members.

Communicate Clearly and Directly

Healthy families communicate their thoughts and feelings in a clear and direct manner. This is especially important when attempting to resolve problems that arise between family members (e.g., spouse, parent-child). Indirect and vague communication will not only fail to resolve problems, but will also contribute to a lack of intimacy and emotional bonding between family members.

Be An Active Listener

An essential aspect of effective communication is listening to what others are saying. Being an active listener involves trying your best to understand the point of view of the other person. Whether you are listening to a spouse or a child, it is important to pay close attention to their verbal and non-verbal messages. As an active listener, you must acknowledge and respect the other person's perspective. For example, when listening to a spouse or child, you should nod your head or say, "I understand," which conveys to the other person that you care about what he or she has to say. Another aspect of active listening is seeking clarification if you do not understand the other family member. This can be done by simply asking, "What did you mean when you said..?" or "Did I understand you correctly?"

Active listening involves acknowledging and respecting the other person's point of view.

In order for effective communication to take place within families, individual family members must be open and honest with one another. This openness and honesty will set the stage for trusting relationships. Without trust, families cannot build strong relationships. Parents, especially, are responsible for providing a safe environment that allows family members to openly express their thoughts and feelings.

Think About the Person With Whom You Are Communicating

Not all family members communicate in the same manner or at the same level. This is especially true of young children. When communicating with young children, it is important for adults to listen carefully to what the children are saying without making unwarranted assumptions. It is also important to take into consideration the ages and maturity levels of children. Parents cannot communicate with children in the same way that they communicate with their spouse because the child may not be old enough to understand.

Pay Attention to Non-Verbal Messages

In addition to carefully listening to what is being said, effective communicators also pay close attention to the non-verbal behaviors of other family members. For example, a spouse or child may say something verbally, but their facial expressions or body language may be telling you something completely different. In cases such as these, it is important to find out how the person is really feeling.

Be Positive

While it is often necessary to address problems between family members, or to deal with negative situations, effective communication is primarily positive. Marital and family researchers have discovered that unhappy family relationships are often the result of negative communication patterns (e.g., criticism, contempt, defensiveness). In fact, John Gottman and his colleagues have found that satisfied married couples had five positive interactions to every one negative interaction (Gottman, 1994). Couples who are very dissatisfied with their relationships typically engage in more negative interactions than positive. It is very important for family members to verbally compliment and encourage one another.

Focus on Family Strengths

Communication is a key to successful family functioning. Researchers agree that clear, open, and frequent communication is a basic characteristic of a strong, healthy family. Families that communicate in healthy ways are more capable of problem-solving and tend to be more satisfied with their relationships.

Family Assessment

Successful healthy families periodically take inventory of their strengths and weaknesses and take steps to improve their home and family environment. Isn't it time your family took an inventory of how well it is doing?

References

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https://pubs.ext.vt.edu/350/350-092/350-092.html

Suggested Reading #2

Whakatauki – Proverbs… Learning social expectations by looking into the past…
by Rose Blackett

Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand. They have faced social upheaval, decades of conflict and epidemics of introduced disease since Europeans arrived in New Zealand. Māori as a group are over represented in our statistics for crime, educational underachievement and poor health.

According to a prominent Māori educator in New Zealand, Jill Bevan-Brown, a true understanding of the present can only be obtained through considering the past. Whakatauki (proverbs) feature strongly within Māori culture in New Zealand. They may provide a window into the past and offer us all a snapshot of what valuable social expectations within contemporary society might look like.

Whakatauki have historically been used as a reference point within speeches on a marae (the area for formal discourse in front of a meeting house). Whakatauki are poetic forms of Te Reo (the Māori language) and often merge historical events or holistic perspectives with underlying messages, which are influential within Māori society.

The best way to illustrate whakatauki is to share examples with their translation, followed by an explanation of their meaning. The following proverbs were shared recently at the SENG Conference in Orlando, Florida.

Tangata ako ana i te whare, te turanga ki te marae, tau ana.

A person who is taught at home will stand collected on the Marae (meeting house grounds).

A child who is given proper values at home and cherished within their family will not only behave well amongst the family but also within society and throughout their life.

Kaore te kumara e whaakii ana tana reka.

The kumara (sweet potato) does not say how sweet he is.

This proverb accentuates the value of humbleness. It is important to consider this proverb when identifying gifted individuals as we must reflect on the role self-nomination plays.

Ka pu te ruha ka hao te rangatahi.

As an old net withers … another is remade.

When an elder is no longer fit to lead, a healthier leader will stand in his place. We should be future focused and support emerging leaders, while acknowledging and valuing our current leaders.

Ehara taku toa, he taki tahi, he toa taki tini.

My success should not be bestowed onto me alone, as it was not individual success but success of a collective.

Said humbly when acknowledged. This encompasses the concept of collective giftedness, which is accepted within Māori culture. It may be the inter-personal and intra-personal relationships within a group that makes them shine. Sometimes no "one" individual possesses a gift. This is in contrast to the internationally accepted mainstream concept of an individual being "gifted."

Kua hinga he totara i te wao nui a Tane.

A totara has fallen in the forest of Tane.

A totara is a huge native tree that grows for hundreds of years in New Zealand. For one of them to fall is a great tragedy. This proverb is said when someone of importance passes away. Just as we value our great trees, we must value our great leaders.

Te amorangi ki mua, te hapai o ki muri.

The leader at the front and the workers behind the scenes.

This is a reference to Maori protocol where the speakers are at the front of the meeting house and the workers are at the back, making sure everything is prepared and that the guests are well looked after. Service to others is considered a gift within Māori culture. It is important to note that both jobs are equally important and are like the yin and yang for, without one, everything would fail.

Whakatauki are relevant for all societies. We should consider the past from the perspective of all participants … not just the majority culture. My challenge to you is to consider the concept of giftedness from all perspectives, as it is often from listening to those who walk before us that we gain the most valuable knowledge.

sengifted.org/archives/articles/whakatauki-proverbs-learning-social-expectations-by-looking-into-the-past

Discussion Rules

1. You cannot change other people. We can share ideas, resources, and opinions, but we can't make other people think the way we do. This community forum is all about finding common ground.

2. Compromise. Talk about the goals underlying your ideas and plans. When you see why people want to do things, you often find you are working toward the same goals in different ways. Meet somewhere in the middle.

3. Practice acceptance. When we accept others' differences, we give them a gift. This is great role modeling for our children.

4. Realize your contribution. Just by being here and participating in this discussion, you are making a difference in the lives of your children and the future of your community. Well done!

Project North Star ~ Discussion Notes ~ Communication Strategies

Discussion	*Strategies*
Importance of Family Communication • Express needs • Express love and admiration • Solve problems • Strong bond • Acceptance and emotional safety • Passing down traditions	**What is needed?** • Regular communication • Feelings vocabulary • Agreed-upon problem solving • Fostering communication skills in kids • Planning for developmental stages • Generational interactions
Types of communication • Instrumental • Affective • Clear and Direct • Clear and Indirect • Masked and Direct (includes proverbs) • Masked and Indirect (includes proverbs)	**When do these work best? With whom?**
Differences in communication styles • Direct versus indirect • Masked versus clear • Instrumental • Affective • Accumulated and shared wisdom	**Strategies to bridge the gap** • Direct communication may feel like being called out in group settings. Make time to conference one to one • Masked communication is evident in folk sayings, truisms, and proverbs. Explore the meanings of these with your class, group or family to establish a common vocabulary • Instrumental communication is necessary and frequent when raising children. Show by doing, or modeling • Affective communication can also be non-verbal—a smile, pat on the shoulder, or nod

Discussion Questions

These questions are included for your convenience, and should be considered a suggestion, not a requirement. You can choose to use some, none, or all of these questions as you facilitate your discussion. Keep in mind that there are no right answers—all opinions are valid, and the purpose here is to open lines of communication.

Questions for Suggested Reading #1

1. Thinking about the Peterson article, how much of your communication is instrumental and how much is affective? How does the ratio of instrumental to affective change when speaking to your child, your parenting partner, your child's teacher, your colleague, etc.?

2. The Peterson article gives examples about direct, indirect, masked, and clear communication and the combinations of each. These are valued differently by different cultures—how do you use these? Do you agree?

3. Peterson advocates for clear and direct communication. Are there times when this is not appropriate?

4. Active listening involves asking questions, using and interpreting non-verbal cues, and showing understanding without making judgments or offering advice. How often do you use this type of listening? With whom? Where does active listening not work?

Questions for Suggested Reading #2

5. Thinking about the Whakatauki Proverbs, how do these resonate with your way of thinking about the world? Do you have phrases or proverbs that are similar? Different? When do you use this type of communication?

6. Do you observe ideas similar to those of the Whakatauki in your family, school, or community?

7. As a group, discuss which of these communication preferences are universal, which are nonapplicable in your area, and which you think create barriers to communication. (Barriers can be created either by having or not having this communication preference.)

Questions that Compare and Contrast Readings #1 and #2

8. Petersen's and Blackett's articles could not be more different, but have a similar underlying purpose—can these approaches, one research-based and the other traditional wisdom, be used to create a common ground of communication in the family, the classroom, and the community? Are they useful, or not?

9. Are these resources compatible? Do they give you ideas about how to communicate across cultures, as well as within your own family, classroom, and workplace?

10. Blackett's article, and Jill Bevan-Brown's work, highlight the importance of the past in determining the future. How does this influence your thinking about communication ideals and expectations to the children?

Practical Strategies

Effective communication within families and between family and school are essential. Children, particularly, benefit from positive modeling of good communication habits.

Building Trust with Schools and Diverse Families (excerpt)

By: Cori Brewster and Jennifer Railsback

Laying the foundation: Building trust between families and schools

A critical first step in engaging diverse families, then, is to focus on building relationships of mutual trust, confidence, and respect. As Henderson and Mapp (2002) emphasize, "When outreach efforts reflect a sincere desire to engage parents and community members as partners in children's education, the studies show that they respond positively" (p. 66). Some places to begin:

• Assess the Level of Trust in the School Community

Selecting an assessment tool is a good place to start (for some examples, see the Resources section). Discuss perceptions of current school-family relationships with teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other family members; identify specific barriers to trust in your community; and solicit input from all parties on ways to address them.

• Actively Welcome Students and Families

Letting families know that they are welcome in the school building, greeting them when they arrive, and posting signs in their native language are just a few ways to communicate to parents that they are valued members of the school community. Hiring administrative staff who speak the same language as families is another way to not only welcome bilingual families, but to provide them with someone who can act as an interpreter. Providing a Family Resource Center, as will be discussed in the following section, is another way to demonstrate that families are welcome at school. Parents and other family members are also more likely to trust that the school values their involvement when they see people who share their cultural and linguistic background among the school staff.

• Begin Relationships on a Positive Note

Adams and Christenson (2000) remark that oftentimes,

> *the only time parents have contact with the school is in crisis situations such as when the student has violated school regulations. ...with no previous contact ...these situations often lead to nontrusting interactions and, subsequently, non-optimal results for the student. A previous time in which to signal trusting intentions is considered an essential prerequisite for handling critical issues for students (p. 482).*

Teachers whose first contacts with family members are positive — notes or phone calls about something good the student did in class, for example — demonstrate to families that the school is interested in and values their child.

- Highlight School Successes

Families cannot be expected to place trust in schools and teachers about whom they know very little. Identify ways to communicate with parents and other family members about student accomplishments, professional development efforts, and other school programs that reflect the school's commitment to quality teaching and learning.

- Improve School-Family Communication

Too often, school-home communication is only one-way, with schools determining what information parents need and sending it to them. Opening up more and better ways for families to communicate with schools, listening to what they say, and responding seriously are essential to trust-building (Adams & Christenson, 2000). "Make sure that you convey the message to parents that their input is considered valuable" (Voltz, 1994, p. 290).

- Demonstrate that you care

Knowing that principals, teachers, and other school staff have their children's best interests at heart is critical to families developing trust in schools (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy, 2001). Even small things, such as learning a few words in a families' native language, make a difference.

- Show respect for all families

Voltz (1994) advises educators to use titles, such as Mr., Ms., or Mrs., when addressing parents, unless they tell you otherwise: "Although the use of first names in some cultures may be viewed as a means of establishing a collegial, friendly relationship, in other cultures, it is viewed as disrespectful or forward" (Voltz, 1994, p. 290). Using "a tone of voice that expresses courtesy and respect" is also important.

- Treat parents as individuals

"Resist the stereotyping of parents based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or any other characteristic. Recognize the diversity that occurs within cultural groups, as well as that which occurs between them" (Voltz, 1994, p. 290).

- Be open with parents

As Voltz (1994) advises, "Don't ignore or dodge tough issues" (p. 290). Making information easily accessible to families, providing it in language they can understand, and ensuring that they know who to talk to if they have questions is a good place to start in demonstrating openness.

- Take parents' concerns seriously

Listen, respond, and follow through. Depending on the situation, consider inviting families to help generate solutions. Be sure that they know what is being done to address their concerns.

- Promote professionalism and strong teaching

To build strong family-school trust, families must view the school principal, teachers, and other personnel as competent, honest, and reliable. Failure to remove staff members who are widely viewed to be racist or ineffective, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), quickly leads to low levels of trust in the school and its leadership.

- Remember that trust-building takes time

Families whose past encounters with the school or community have been negative may have no reason to expect things will be different now. Rebuilding trust takes time and a serious commitment to establishing strong relationships.

When a school initiates and implements programs, policies, and procedures with the express intention of seriously meeting the needs of the students, then the school can begin to develop an environment in which the community can begin to rightfully place trust in the local school and its staff (Young, 1998, p. 18).

Retrieved from http://www.adlit.org/article/21522/#strategies

Follow-up and Extension on Readings and Discussion

The following excerpts, links, and research questions are included to begin to broaden and deepen your exploration of the topic. These, again, are suggestions, not required reading and research. This section is included for those whose interest was sparked, and who seek more information. This is not a comprehensive list of resources by any means. As you explore these suggestions, you will find many, many more. Follow your interest, build on previous knowledge, and share with your community!

Shared Wisdom

Strategies for Cross-Generational Relationship Building (excerpt)

By Kate Berardo and Simma Lieberman

Kate and Simma discuss why generational differences matter and how to overcome age barriers and build cross-generational relationships in the workplace. Issues of race, gender, culture, and sexual orientation have dominated the diversity arena for some time, leaving lurking in the darkness a difference that causes daily miscommunication and prevents untold numbers of relationships from being built: generational differences. The unsung element of difficulty, communication across generations is often fraught with assumptions, frustrations, and misunderstanding.

Why Generational Differences Matter

The environment that surrounded you as you grew up shaped your life in more ways than you may realize. World events, like wars, depression, or conversely economic prosperity, shape generations. So does technology. Did you grow up with the radio, TV, computer, iPod—or all of the above? Music, politics of the time, and ideas about what it means to be a family—these too shape how different generations view and appreciate the life around them. Translated into workplace terms, this often means different values, ideas, work ethics, attitudes toward authority, and outlooks on life. Though the U.S.

workplace culture values speed ("time is money") and hard work, just how fast you work and what is hard work, will be subject to generational interpretation. This means the possible combinations of intergenerational conflict can be great. Common complaints you hear from older generations about younger generations are that they are speed-obsessed, too casual and informal, unappreciative of traditional ways of doing things, and technology dependent (as in, they don't value face-to-face communication enough). On the flip side, you can hear younger generations complaining that older generations are out-of-date, stuck in their ways, too stiff, and completely computer unsavvy (as in, they won't text with me and take too long to respond to my emails). Many generations feel like they are not respected by other generations, and often that they are discriminated against because of their age (age bias).

At the same time, generational differences exist among a field of differences, including race, gender, sexual orientation and culture. These other differences need to be taken into consideration. Some cultures, for example, value youth, while others value the wisdom of old age. Look at how older family members are treated within a family to get an idea of the predominant value in different cultures: are older family members put in old-folk homes when they need assistance or are they cared for by family members?

Like all difference, generalizations about generational differences should be used only as guidelines to help you understand what might be preventing understanding. Your goal should be to move from the categories (be it, white, gay/lesbian, Korean, or Baby Boomer) to the people themselves (Samantha, Chung, Mr. Yamamoto, and Consuelo) quickly and accurately.

Further Investigation

Articles

- "Building Trust with Schools and Diverse Families"
  http://www.adlit.org/article/21522/#strategies

- see more articles at: http://www.culturosity.com/articles/cross-generationalrealtionshipbuilding.htm

Websites

- Visit **the Harvard Family Research Project**, and take a look at these snapshots of school, family and community collaboration in action. You will find lots of neat, practical ideas. http://www.hfrp.org/family-involvement/projects/snapshots

Books

- A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children, by Webb, et. al.