

Effective Communication — The Mortar That Holds the Team Together

by Paula Jorde Bloom

Wise men speak because they have something to say,
Fools speak because they have to say something. — Plato

Communication is an elusive concept that involves a circular process of sharing one's ideas and feelings with others and interpreting the feedback received. In many ways, effective leadership in early childhood education is synonymous with effective communication because the success of a child care program relies so heavily on the open, honest exchange of information, ideas, and feelings. Good communication is the lubricating oil that makes all the parts of an operation run smoothly and effectively.

The nature of the child care business guarantees that there will always be some misunderstandings and problems in human relationships. But what distinguishes good programs, where communication channels are open and direct, is that these misunderstandings are infrequent. When they do occur, grievances and problems are dealt with quickly and vigorously. Good communication skills can be learned and deliberately applied in the child care setting. The following techniques culled from a variety of resources will be helpful.

Ask yourself what you want to accomplish in an exchange with another person: If we have a clear image in our own minds of the result we want by the end of the conversa-

tion, often the steps and methods we should use will fall clearly in place. If we don't know precisely what we want to accomplish, we may communicate what we think we should say or what we think the other person wants to hear, instead of what is needed to accomplish our purpose.

Avoid generalities when describing people or things: There is a real temptation to rely on vague words like good, bad, shy, aggressive, and hostile when talking to parents and staff about children in a school setting. Loaded words are easily open to misinterpretation. Try to give specific examples to illustrate what you want to say. If you can't think of a specific example, perhaps you don't really mean what you were going to say anyway.

Check your tone: It is not what we say but how we say it that usually determines how the other person interprets what we have said. What he/she "hears" may totally negate our verbal communication. We must be sensitive to the manner in which we convey a message to another person. Our tone is one of the strongest traits of our style of relating to other people. It must be consistent with our feelings and what we want to accomplish from a conversation.

Make your words and nonverbal actions congruent: Just as the tone of our voice plays an important role in the success we have in communicating our message, so too do the nonverbal nuances that are part of our communicating style. Our personal mannerisms in terms of dress, gestures, eye contact, sitting or standing position, and other expressive features carry powerful messages which can strengthen or weaken what we hope to communicate. Some communications researchers believe that fully 60% of all communication between people is based on body language. This is particularly true in the first few minutes of contact. Opinions derived from body signals form a strong basis of accepting or rejecting

what the person is about to say. If we want words and body language to be consistent and reinforce what we want to convey, we must give careful consideration to this dimension of the communicating process.

Avoid indirect communication whenever possible: Since gestures, facial expressions, and body language in general are so important in communicating our message, it behooves us to try to avoid nonpersonal exchanges (like telephone conversations) when the content of what we are communicating may in the slightest way be misconstrued or open to misinterpretation. The better you know a person and the longer and more established your relationship, the safer it is to communicate in indirect ways. With parents, board members, and community contacts, strive first for personal contact to build trust and establish rapport, before relying predominantly on written communications or telephone conversations.

Try to visualize your ideas for other people: It is easier to grasp an abstraction if we can relate it to something concrete. People who communicate well are able to draw pictures with their words. They create images that express what they hope to convey in simple, precise ways that help people understand and remember what has been said to them.

Don't hesitate to ask for clarification: Many times when we don't understand what has been said to us, we hesitate to say so. Fuzzy, unclear communication is a barrier to good interpersonal relationships. We need to feel the confidence to say, "I'm not quite sure I understand you," or "What do you mean by that?" Asking people tactfully to rephrase and clarify what they say can have the added benefit of allowing the

other person to do the same to you if what you have said is unclear.

Don't ask a question or give a choice when there isn't one: We learn quickly when dealing with young children that when we word a command like a question ("Johnny, don't you want to clean up now?") or tag on an "okay" ("Let's all put away the blocks, okay?"), children quickly pick up on our lack of decisiveness. The same rule applies to adults as well. Making a direct request to a staff person should be done so as to convey what we want done and by when with tact and firmness.

Be aware of how inanimate objects can effect communication: A desk, seating arrangement, a poorly positioned table, or other furniture can all be barriers to communication. To facilitate open communication with other people, we must pay attention to the way we utilize our physical space to reflect the messages we want to convey. Even the distance between chairs in a seating arrangement or the height differences between standing and sitting individuals can be barriers to an open exchange.

Try not to overcommunicate: Perhaps the hardest part of talking is knowing when to stop. Rambling, forgetting the point, repetition, and overdetailing not only confuses people (and bores them) but also takes up valuable time. Don't cloud the main point of what you want to say. Say it and stop talking.

Respect the importance of good timing: How an individual receives a request or handles a conversation has a lot to do with the appropriate time and place. People can be unnerved if we interrupt their concentration or disrupt an activity to ask a question, make a request, or begin a conversation. We need to respect

their needs by asking, "Is this a good time for us to talk about . . . ?" By extending this respect, we are also conveying the message that we appreciate the same courtesy in return.

Be an active listener: Talking is only half the equation in good communication. Of equal importance is learning to be an empathetic, attentive listener. There is an old saying, "Since we were given only one mouth but two ears, perhaps we were meant to listen twice as much as we talk." There's a great deal of truth in that remark that can help us improve our communicating skills. Active listening is difficult. Our minds tend to race ahead and think of what we are going to say next, or get sidetracked with wandering thoughts. Acknowledging responses, nodding, and reflecting back what the other person has said demonstrate that we are indeed interested and concerned and that we care. Restating in our own words what the person has said also clears up any misunderstanding in what was communicated.

Sensitive listening skills are rare; but if we are serious about opening communication channels, we must let others know that we are receptive to feedback. This does not mean that we have to agree with what is being expressed. It only means that we have to convey to others that we appreciate their openness and that they have given us a clearer understanding of the picture. Some phrases that might be helpful:

- "I understand how you feel now."
- "Thank you for being so open with me."
- "What would you like me to do?"
- "I am concerned about how you feel about . . ."

Sometimes written communication is best: Sometimes what we need to communicate can best be transmitted

in a written memo. Written notes can also serve as useful follow-up by highlighting the main points of a conversation, noting deadlines and restating specific requests. In this way we are not relying on the person's memory to follow through. But just as we take pains to be precise, thoughtful, and direct verbally, we need to exercise the same skills in written communication. It is imperative that we develop good habits of clear, concise communication. Clarity means shortness, simplicity, and precision in words. Covering too many topics and being too verbose overwhelms the reader. Given too much data to absorb or too many written communications, people are not able to distinguish the important from the trivial, and may end up rejecting or not reading it.

Before writing a memo, ask yourself what you hope to accomplish. Each sentence should bring you closer to that objective. The most important rule in written communication is to keep it simple. Don't try to dazzle people with your vocabulary or your technical know-how. Organize your thoughts in a logical fashion, and stick to your salient points without catch-all phrases that are vague and not easily understood. *Psychobabble* benefits no one.

The essence of good communication is to say what you need to say in as direct a way as possible. Remember, The Lord's Prayer has only 71 words, the Ten Commandments 297, and the Gettysburg Address only 268.

Keep sentences and paragraphs short, keep to the point, and remember:

It is not enough to write merely to be understood. We must write so that we cannot possibly be misunderstood!

— Robert Louis Stevenson

Assessing Perceptions about Communication

The following assessment tool focuses on staff's perceptions of the effectiveness of communication at the center. Distribute the Communication Questionnaire and a blank envelope to all teaching staff who work at the center more than ten hours per week. Place a box labeled "Questionnaire Return Box" in your center's office or staff room and ask staff to put their completed questionnaires in this box.

When all questionnaires have been returned, total the individual scores of respondents. They will range from 10-50. Then sum all respondents' scores and divide by the number of staff completing the questionnaire. This will yield an average score.

Scores between 40-50 indicate that staff perceive the communication processes of the center to be quite positive. Scores between 10-20 indicate staff feel this is an area that may need some improvement. An individual item analysis will give you a clearer picture of what areas of communication staff feel need to be improved. By comparing communication scores from one year to the next, you will have valuable feedback about how successful you have been in your efforts to improve oral and written communication.

*Paula Jorde Bloom is associate professor of early childhood education at National-Louis University in Evanston, Illinois. Dr. Bloom is the author of several books, including **Avoiding Burnout** (New Horizons), **A Great Place to Work** (NAEYC), and **Living and Learning with Children** (New Horizons).*

Communication Questionnaire

This questionnaire assesses your attitudes about the effectiveness of different communication processes in our center. Your honest and candid responses to these questions are appreciated. When you have completed your questionnaire, please put it in the envelope you have received and place it in the "Questionnaire Return Box" in the office. There is no need to include your name.

Circle from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) how you feel about the following statements:

	strongly disagree				strongly agree
Written communication at this center is clear	1	2	3	4	5
Staff seem well-informed most of the time	1	2	3	4	5
The information I receive is usually accurate	1	2	3	4	5
Parents seem well-informed about issues and events	1	2	3	4	5
Communication between teachers is open and direct	1	2	3	4	5
Communication between the director and staff is open	1	2	3	4	5
Expressing my feelings is valued and easy to do here	1	2	3	4	5
People feel comfortable to disagree with one another	1	2	3	4	5
The director makes an effort to solicit feedback	1	2	3	4	5
Policy manuals and written procedures are clear	1	2	3	4	5

What suggestions do you have for improving communication processes at this center?

*From: P. J. Bloom, M. Sheerer, and J. Britz (1991). **Blueprint for Action: Achieving Center-Based Change Through Staff Development.** Lake Forest, IL: New Horizons, page 191. Reprinted with permission.*