



## Family Centre Information Package

### Communication

#### WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Communication is a term applied to the procedure of using words as well as sounds, signs, or gestures to transmit information or to express your ideas, feelings, etc., to another person. So it is clear that communication involves more than just what you say. *How* you say it can be just as important as the words you use.

#### WHY IS COMMUNICATION SO IMPORTANT?

Good communication skills can be applied to all areas of life: personal friendships, intimate relationships, work situations, conflict resolution, parenting, and even encounters with acquaintances and strangers. Communication allows others to know what we are thinking and feeling, and allows us the opportunity to explain, question, and clarify things that are not understood. Given that most of us are not mind-readers, communication is an essential part of social interactions.

#### TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

There are 4 main styles of communication: Passive, Aggressive, Passive-Aggressive, and Assertive. We will look at these styles and their effects individually.

##### PASSIVE COMMUNICATION

“I don’t really matter all that much.”

A passive communicator:

- Respects the needs of others before their own. They don’t like to “rock the boat.”
- May often speak quietly or hesitate a lot when speaking.
- Is not likely to stand up for themselves, and may allow themselves to be bullied, or even ignored.
- May avoid expressing their opinions but, when they do, they may follow them with phrases like, “but it isn’t really important,” or “unless you don’t want to.”
- Will often have slumped posture and avoid making much direct eye contact.
- May nod in agreement with another speaker, no matter what is being said.
- May apologize a lot, even when something is not their fault.

Passive communication can have the following effects on the communicator:

- Initially, the communicator may feel good for being “selfless,” though this may not last long
- Can have a negative effect on self-esteem, as well as on relationships
- Feelings of being hurt, even angry, due to needs being ignored by others
- Serious issues are rarely addressed
- Can feel depressed or anxious



Source: Clip Art

### **AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION**

“No one else matters as much as I do.”

An aggressive communicator:

- Ensures their needs are met in a way that violates the needs of others. They may even believe others do not have the right to ask for what they want.
- May try to avoid discomfort at all costs, even if it means getting into conflict.
- May try to dominate others, sometimes by humiliation, criticism, or blame.
- An aggressive communicator will often speak in a loud, overbearing voice and behave in a rude or threatening manner.
- Is likely not a good listener and may frequently interrupt others.
- Is not likely to compromise with others.
- May use aggression to cope with low self-esteem.

Aggressive communication may have the following effects (among others):

- Potential to escalate to yelling and/or physical aggression
- Alienation of self and others
- Creating fear, anger, resentment in relationships
- Damage may be done to others’ self-esteem
- Initially, this style can make the communicator feel better, but feelings of guilt and shame may follow an outburst

### **PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION**

“You should know what matters, but I’m not telling you if you don’t.”

A passive-aggressive communicator:

- Expresses their needs in an indirect way rather than stating them plainly.
- Appears passive on the surface, but anger is acted out in subtle ways.

- May use sarcasm or make jokes frequently, though close consideration shows the jokes to be more hurtful than funny.
- May mutter under her breath or send a dirty look when in conflict, but deny anything is wrong.
- May seem to be cooperative yet do things to annoy or undermine.
- May have difficulty acknowledging their anger and other negative emotions.
- May show facial expressions inconsistent with their feelings, such as smiling when disappointed or angry.
- May complain often about being a “doormat” while being unwilling to do anything to change it.
- May use this communication style to cope with feeling powerless and resentful.

The effects of passive-aggression may include:

- Alienation from others.
- Sarcasm, biting comments, and “jokes” can result in hurt feelings in others.
- Personal relationships may become strained.
- Serious issues and concerns are rarely dealt with.
- Can lead to frustration for both the communicator (feeling like they have no voice) and for the listener (never knowing what the communicator really wants).
- Suspicion from others about whether or not the person is being sincere.

### **ASSERTIVE COMMUNICATION**

“You matter just as much as I do.”

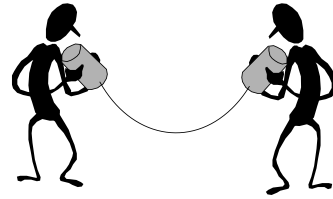
An assertive communicator:

- Expresses their own needs and opinions while ensuring the needs and opinions of others are also respected.
- State their feelings and opinions clearly and appropriately.
- Values who they are and advocates for themselves.
- Is a good listener and doesn’t interrupt.
- Will have good eye contact and a confident, relaxed posture.
- Speaks in a calm, clear voice.
- Strives to compromise so everyone’s needs are met as best they can.
- Is comfortable asking for what they need or want.
- Is able to deal with conflict in direct and healthy ways.

- Takes responsibility for himself and doesn't take responsibility for others' actions.
- Knows and lets others know their personal boundaries.
- Doesn't try to control others.

The effects of assertive communication can include:

- Problems are often solved in a respectful way.
- Increased self-esteem.
- Better relationships with other people.
- Increased feeling of being connected to others.
- Feeling in control of your life.



Source: Clip Art

### DO COMMUNICATION STYLES CHANGE?

Most of us have used each of these communication styles at least once in a while. Imagine you are out at a restaurant having dinner and, when the food is brought to the table, you find you didn't get what you ordered. The server comes to the table and asks how the meal tastes so far:

- Maybe, if you had a very bad day or had a fight with your partner, you may respond in an **aggressive** way: "This isn't what I ordered at all! Take it back and bring me what I ordered. How hard is it to do your job properly?"
- Maybe you're frustrated because people seemed to be taking credit for your ideas all day. You might respond in a **passive-aggressive** way, smiling ; "Everything is just fine, thanks. Just the way I like it." When your server leaves, you add to your friends; "So much for her tip..."
- If you are really tired, or just not feeling yourself that day, you may decide it just isn't worth the bother of telling your server she messed up the order. You may answer **passively**; "It's great, thanks," and eat your meal in disappointed silence.
- On a good day, you may have the confidence to answer **assertively**: "It looks really delicious, but this isn't what I had ordered. No problem, mistakes happen - how long do you think it will be until my order can be fixed?"

### HOW DO I KNOW IF COMMUNICATION IS A PROBLEM?

To communicate effectively, a speaker must do more than just say words. Communication includes body language and other behaviours like how fast you are speaking, or the pitch of your voice. It also helps to be a good listener. Good communication happens when both people make efforts to understand each other.

Communicating well can be hard sometimes. This is a normal part of being human; sometimes we make mistakes! However, if communication is often a problem for you, you may notice one or many of these issues:

- You feel confused or uncomfortable in many conversations.
- You are known as someone who always blows up in discussions.
- When you try to solve one problem, you end up with more to solve.
- People avoid talking to you, especially when it comes to serious or uncomfortable discussions.
- People don't seem to have heard, or understood, what you have said. Or you have difficulty in getting questions answered.
- You frequently come away from a conversation feeling either confused, unfulfilled, angry, guilty, annoyed, or other uncomfortable emotions.
- You wind up yelling almost every time you talk to your spouse/partner or children.
- You are often unwilling to say what you are feeling or express your needs directly.
- You lose track of a conversation because you are distracted by your internal thoughts **about** the conversation.
- You often interrupt others when they are speaking to you.
- You have few close relationships, or you may not feel deeply connected to anyone.
- You often feel blindsided when people become emotional in their conversations with you.

There are many other ways in which a communication problem might show itself. The bottom line is: if you have trouble in expressing your views, feelings, or needs and having them understood by others, you may want to practice your assertive communication skills.

### **FAMILY CENTRE SERVICES**

Family Centre can help you connect to resources in our community through our Family Connector. They are knowledgeable about the agencies and resources available in Lethbridge and surrounding area and can help get you to the right service.

We also offer parent support, where parent educators support you in supporting your children.

Please leave a message for our Family Connector at (403) 320-4232 extension 240.

Family Centre offers the Kin Family Resource Library. Visitors to the library have access to books, videos, DVDs, and magazines that cover a variety of topics, including

communication. There is no cost for accessing the library; all that is required is a library card, which is available at reception.

## HOW TO COMMUNICATE ASSERTIVELY

There are several things you can do to be a more assertive communicator. Some of these include the following:

- Start with baby steps. Practice your assertiveness skills when you are not feeling strongly about the topic, and it is not a serious situation.
- State your point of view clearly. It will be easier for you to be understood if you are “to the point.”
- Tell the other person how you feel and make sure to listen when they do the same.
  - It may help to build a good “feelings vocabulary.” You can find lists of emotions [here](#), or [here](#).
- Speak at a normal volume, and a calm pace. Remember, *how* you say something can be just as important as *what* you say.
- Face the person, lean in towards them if you’re sitting down, and make good eye contact. Try to look confident, even if you don’t feel that way.
- Be aware of your emotions when communicating. Ask for a break if your emotions are starting to become overwhelming. When emotions run high, we are more likely to lash out aggressively or passively shut down. This makes it more difficult to be assertive.
- Make an effort to talk about yourself in positive ways. Try to avoid adding things like “You might think this is crazy...” or “...but that’s just my opinion.” And try not to follow up your statements with questions, like “Is that okay?” You have a right to feel the way you do and your opinion is important.
- When possible, rehearse what you would like to say ahead of time, so you will be prepared when the time comes to talk. That way you won’t be scrambling to think of how to best voice your opinion.
- If you find it difficult to say no to a request, practicing can make it easier. Be firm, and only offer an explanation if it is necessary. A simple “No, I won’t be able to” can be very effective.
- Stick to facts. Avoid labeling and exaggerations.

## ACTIVE LISTENING



Listening is just as important as speaking in communication. Many people think listening is a passive activity that means “being quiet while the other person is speaking.” But, to be an effective listener, you need to take an active role! When you do, you will most likely find you have fewer misunderstandings and more open conversations. *Active listening* includes several tools you can use to show the other person you are listening to, and understanding, what they are saying. These tools can also be used to clarify and get more information from the speaker. One tool is reflecting back the content of what is being said (i.e., the actual message) or the emotions you believe the speaker is feeling. You don’t want to reflect back or repeat every sentence that someone is saying to you – that can sound like parroting and can cause you to miss the meaning of what is being said. Stick to the important points and/or paraphrase every few minutes to show that you are hearing and trying to understand the other person. You can start your paraphrasing with something like (*add the feeling parts in when you are trying to paraphrase feelings*):

- What I’m hearing is ... (*you feel...*)
- It sounds like ... (*you are feeling...*)
- I think you’re saying ... (*that you feel...*)

Active listening also includes obtaining more information when you don’t understand something, this can be done by using clarifying questions. Just make sure you wait until the speaker is finished his point before asking them. Clarifying questions can sound like:

- By \_\_\_\_\_ do you mean \_\_\_\_\_?
- Can you explain that a bit more for me?
- How do you feel about that? (*some people don’t automatically talk about their feelings*)

It is best not to interrupt when someone else is speaking, even if you don’t agree with what they’re saying. It will most likely frustrate everyone and makes it harder to understand the message. Wait until there is a natural pause in the conversation or until the person speaking has finished their point.

Avoid attacking or pressuring the speaker. The point of active listening is to understand the other person’s perspective, not to “be right” or even fix the problem. Be honest, but assertive, about your responses to the information, even if you feel yourself having an emotional response to what is being said. If that happens, you might want to say something like:

- I'm not sure I understand what you're saying correctly, and I find myself feeling defensive. What I thought you said was \_\_\_\_\_. Is that what you meant?

For quick-reference information on active listening and tips on how to active listening, click [here](#).

### **I STATEMENTS**

**"I statements"** are very useful tools for communicating assertively because they allow you to express your feelings and opinions in a way that does not blame, judge, or accuse the other person. You statements do just the opposite, examples of "You statements" might be, "You are so lazy!" or "You make me so mad!", these do not support assertive communication.

To make a great "I statement", follow these 3 steps:

- Name the feeling ("I feel..."): Example – "I feel disappointed when..."
  - Try to avoid inserting "like" or "that" after "I feel." This is actually a disguised "you statement": Example – "I feel *like* you never do anything around the house."
- Identify the behaviour or conditions under which you feel this way: Example – "I feel disappointed when tasks we agreed on are not done."
  - NOTE: try not to include the word "you" in this part because it can make the other person feel blamed and result in defensiveness. An effective "*I statement*" is all about the speaker, not the listener!
- Explain why those conditions/behaviours lead to the feeling ("because..."): Example – "I feel disappointed when tasks we agreed on are not done because it makes it seem like our discussion did not mean anything."
- (Optional 4<sup>th</sup> step) Include a behaviour/condition you would rather see: Example – "Please let me know next time you have to work late so I don't feel disappointed when you're not home on time."

Instead of saying "I feel angry when you ignore me and walk away," an example of an effective *I statement* might be:

- I feel angry when we do not get to finish a discussion. It makes me feel like the issue isn't important to you. I would prefer that we finish the discussion so we can resolve the issue.



When in doubt, you can always stick with the simplest of *I statements*: those that include only how you feel. Once you identify how you are feeling, you can pursue a conversation about why you feel that way.

- I feel unheard right now.
- I am worried about our relationship.
- I feel hurt by that statement.

Just to be clear, the following sentence stem examples are **NOT *I statements***. Although they begin with talking about how you feel, they are designed to accuse and blame the person with whom you are speaking. They are aggressive, rather than assertive, statements:

- I feel that you....
- I feel like you...

**REMEMBER: The formula for *I statements* looks like this:**

I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_. (Optional extra) I would prefer \_\_\_\_\_.

## RESOURCES

### WEBSITES

- Effective Communication: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/effective-communication.htm>
- Mind Tools Online Training System – Improve Your Communication Skills: <http://www.mindtools.com/page8.html>

### VIDEO

- *Dunstan Baby Language*: This DVD program will teach parents how to identify the noises babies (aged 0-3 months) make and what these noises mean. Available in the Kin Family Resource Library.

### BOOKS

- *Saying What You Mean* by Joy Wilt: teaches children about communication skills and how we communicate using our face, body, words, and art. Available in the Kin Family Resource Library.

- *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler: teaches strategies and skills for turning hurt feelings into productive dialogue, especially in high-stakes situations, making it “safe to talk about almost anything.”
- *How to Talk so Your Kids Will Listen and Listen so Your Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish: for parents and those who work with kids, providing suggestions for coping with a child’s negative feelings, expressing your own feelings without being hurtful, and using praise effectively
- *The Dance of Connection: How to Talk to Someone When You’re Mad, Hurt, Scared, Frustrated, Insulted, Betrayed, or Desperate* by Harriet Lerner: Whether dealing with a spouse or partner, friend or family member, this book offers strategies for conversing with honesty and integrity, even if the other person isn’t.

To find some of these books, along with many other great resources, please visit the Kin Family Resource Library at Family Centre. Additional books can also be found at the Lethbridge Public Library: <http://www.lethlib.ca/>

#### **OTHER**

- Toastmasters: Club members will improve communication, leadership, and public-speaking skills in a supportive setting. For local clubs click [here](#).
- Communication in Relationships (pdf):  
[http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/How\\_Can\\_I\\_Communicate\\_Better.pdf](http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/How_Can_I_Communicate_Better.pdf)

#### **REFERENCES**

- Feeling Good Handbook by David Burns
- <http://serenityonlinetherapy.com/assertiveness.htm>
- <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/resources/docs/Info-assertive%20communication.pdf>
- <http://www.squidoo.com/passive-aggressive-assertive>
- <http://www.lotusgroup.biz/blog/passive-assertive-aggressive-how-to-tell-the-difference/>
- <http://www.mindtools.com/page8.html>