

## Introduction to Parenting

India is in transition; we are marching from orthodoxy to modernity; our perspectives are reforming from being traditionalistic to futuristic. Many of us do not want our children to pursue the professions practiced by our ancestors or ourselves. But our views about universality of marriages and widespread belief of having children to feel complete as human beings have remained unchanged.

Unfortunately there are no standard textbooks and guides that would help us be successful as a spouse or as a parent. Both the positions are dependent on the temperamental traits of all the individuals involved. A good fit among the persons who are participants of these major responsibilities of marriage and parenting would make every one enjoy the journey. To function effectively as a spouse and as a parent we need the capacity to self-introspect and to create methodologies which would suit the changing scenario of our immediate environment.

Indian families have been predominantly living in villages. Education and job opportunities are attracting youngsters to the towns/cities. The employed youngsters choose to settle in the towns/cities after marriage. This paves way for nuclear families as the elders are not able to move with them. Thus the current generation parents do not have supporting elders to help them bring up their children. Hence parents need the advice of professionals in seeing their children grow up into well-equipped young adults.

Parents of these days are very keen on providing their best to the children with respect to the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. In the process of fulfilling this desire of theirs many parents are in tightly placed employment that makes it difficult for them to give time to their children.

Parents are under pressure to meet the multiple roles as an employee, a spouse and a parent with very little information on how to carry on with the given tasks. Parents seem to have yardsticks for success like certain material comforts, specified assets and clear documents to rely on during their old age. This chase for material assets, as decided by the parental weakness to succumb to peer pressure is creating new parenting practices that are contributing to the evolution of a new cohort of children who are struggling to evolve into responsible adults.

Children are not having people to interact with; children are also not continuously exposed to genuine love, affection and compassion that are usually conveyed in every action from morning to evening by adults around them; open air play, self-care, creativity, effective interpersonal relationships and safety, are slowly being replaced by indoor activities, over indulgent parental practices, electronic baby sitters that hamper creativity, social networking with virtual friends that does not promote effective communication skills, unsafe ecstasy seeking practices like experimentation with substances, etc.

Recent trends show that we are not only developing rapidly with respect to economics, we are also being exposed to the associated social challenges that accompany such development. Disintegration of joint families, disruption of marital bonds due to either emotional or legal divorce between

spouses, rapid urbanization with diminution of open spaces for recreation are making our children live in a new environment which is not safe and supportive.

Unless we take steps to consciously correct the current trends with proactive steps we may lose the opportunity that has been given to us and wonder what went wrong where and stare at the evolving unrest with helplessness, disappointment and sadness.

Children have been brought into this world because we all want to enjoy being parents. The inherent need to nurture and cherish another person in our lives has made us all take the responsibility of bringing up children. Parenting can be viewed as a challenge or it can be seen as an opportunity to extend ourselves in contributing towards the growth of our younger ones. It is a learning journey with many challenges that can be overcome with a smile provided we have the openness to unlearn certain techniques and the willingness to acquire new skills that are found to be useful in handling certain situations that arise in the process.

Effective parenting during early childhood definitely helps in the development of a capable, independent young adult. There are many programs in our country that focus on success in academics and professional goals which are conducted by allied health professionals. Demand for parenting programs by Paediatricians who have been associated with parents since the birth of the child to help in the holistic development of the child into a mature, balanced, self-reliant adult is a novel development in the recent years. As we do not have a parenting guide developed by Indian Paediatricians, we have ventured into this early attempt at creating one keeping in mind the tradition and values that have been part of life in India.

Love for the child to establish connection, setting limits to control behavior, respecting individuality, effective role modeling to imbibe values and habits and providing safety and protection are the key dimensions of parenting. This manual is aimed at focusing on the parenting skills that would make us enjoy our children as angels and as our assets and not make us feel exasperated in the roles that we have sought for ourselves.

Happy Parenting!

*Quality Care within Reach...*

## Relationships during Childhood and Adolescence

There are numerous relationships made during childhood and adolescence. We as parents play a major role in the establishment of meaningful relationships in the life of our children. The pattern of relationships made during childhood has impact on future relationships. There are many factors that determine the quality of relationship. Child's temperament and our expectations decide the pattern of communication between parents and children. The communication style between parents and children contribute towards the parenting style that is practiced over a period of time. Depending on the parenting style the child's personality evolves. Pattern of communication practiced by us is largely determined by the parenting we received during our childhood and adolescence.

The significant relationships a child has to enrich during his or her development are the relationships with Parents, Grandparents, Siblings, Friends and Significant adults including teachers, care takers and helpers.

The quality of all relationships is determined by the type of relationship that evolves between parents and children from birth onwards.

### Parent Child Relationship:

A child's relationship with the parents begins even before conception. From the time of planning for a baby the child forms a part of the parent's life. With confirmation of the pregnancy the parents start living with the baby to be born. Almost all plans are made and almost all discussions take place with the child in the background even before birth. As the pregnancy progresses we get attached to the baby to a large extent that we arrange the household to receive the new one with awe and joy.

With the birth of the baby in addition to happiness and rejoice there is minimal concern and apprehension about the way the baby is going to enjoy this world. Whether the baby enjoys this world or finds the place as a strange one is to a large extent determined by the bonding the baby develops with the parent. The bonding between the parent and the child is established over a period based on the **temperament of the child, the attachment pattern established during early childhood and the parenting style** that evolves during childhood and adolescence.

Each child has its own temperament with which he or she is born. It is essential that we be aware of the temperament of our child. There are nine temperamental traits.

*Activity level:* Some children are very active even as a newborn baby. They would keep moving their legs and hands almost always. Some children are very lethargic and sluggish since birth.

*Rhythmicity:* Some children have their needs like hunger, thirst and sleep in a perfect rhythm. Some children do not settle well.

*Approach and withdrawal:* When a new object is given a few children reach for them immediately but a few others avoid the new object totally.

**Adaptability:** Similarly some children fit in new surroundings well whereas a few others cannot get adjusted to the new environment.

**Threshold of responsiveness:** Light, sound, wind, heat etc evoke various responses in children. Some children enjoy loud noises but some scream when exposed to loud sounds.

**Intensity of reaction:** Especially after an injection some babies cry for a long time compared to others who settle quickly.

**Quality of mood:** Some babies are very bubbly, cheerful and pleasant but some are always grumpy, sad and pouting.

**Distractibility:** Slight change in the environment like the sound of a fan, person passing by etc can turn some children away from focus.

**Attention span and persistence:** While listening to a story a few children may be able to sit through for long hours with engrossed attention. But some children cannot sit and listen to anything that is said for a long duration.

When the temperament of the child matches our expectations the parent child bonding is at its peak. This “Goodness of Fit” ensures a nurturing relationship with the child with continuous encouragement and appreciation. Many of us respond to the child depending on the temperament the child has. For example it is much easy to care for a baby who has a perfect rhythmicity. Our interactions are very cheerful and enthusiastic as the child’s needs are predictable. If the child had no rhythmicity it tires us and we tend to show our displeasure when we are stretched beyond our limits. Similarly a cheerful child makes the parent also cheerful.

The second most important factor that determines the parent child bonding is the attachment the child develops with the parents during early childhood. Before the child turns two, the attachment patterns with the parent are established. This is determined by the quality of care received from the parents.

A child who receives warmth, love, encouragement, appreciation, compassion and care with sensitivity from parents feels more secure. The child uses the parent as a secure base and moves away from the parent to explore the world, but returns to the parent after a while with a smile. The child comes back running to the parent on task completion and would feel comfortable to recount the experiences gained.

A child who is brought up by parents who show no response to the child in distress, treats the parent as a stranger and avoids the interaction with the parent either by ignoring the parent, or by moving away from their vicinity. Such a child has insecure avoidant attachment with parents.

Some parents switch between appropriate responses to the child and neglect of the child. The confused child is not able to fix the parents as a secure base as the responses from the parent has not been predictable so long. The child is very insecure and becomes clingy even before the parent



moves out of their vicinity. The child is constantly preoccupied about the availability of the parent. When separation from the parent happens the child finds difficulty in settling down with the substitute caretaker and shows anger and disapproval. When the parent returns the child does not know how to react. The child shows anger, resentment and is usually hesitant to return to the parent. This is the insecure ambivalent attachment

Parents who are abusive generate fear and anger in their child even during early childhood. The child does come back to the parent after separation but as he or she is not sure of the responses, usually shows its back to the parent and anticipates rejection. This is the disorganized attachment.

At birth the baby is dependent on parents for all needs. The baby is fragile and helpless and thus has to be approached with softness and compassion. As the baby grows up the infant understands majority of the cues from the parents and responds accordingly. If the parent showers unconditional love the baby responds with love, if the parent shows apathy and in the worst of scenarios resentment, the baby either withdraws or responds with anger and remorse. This mutual interaction between parent and child determines the quality of attachment formed. Here parents can build a positive secure attachment pattern by being available, loving and giving with genuine interest in the positive development of the baby irrespective of the negative temperament of the child.

Attachments established with parents during early childhood determine the formation of secure relationships with all other adults and friends during childhood. Enriching relationship with parents forms with continuous interactions with the baby since birth. The softness and warmth in the communication with the babies make the child respond in a positive manner and this motivates the mother or father to interact for a longer period of time. A cheerful child attracts everyone to his or her side whereas a grumpy child will not be able to enjoy happy interactions as the child is not able to elicit positive interactions. The parenting talent comes out if the parent develops the capacity to make a grumpy child cheerful by various interactions that are amusing to the child. The availability and predictability of responses from the parents encourages a secure attachment with the children Thus insecure attachment can be made into secure attachment with efforts from parents.

As the child grows up, the communication style of the parents determines the quality of bonding with the parent. An aggressive parent elicits either a rebellious child or creates a submissive child who lives in constant fear. A passive parent contributes to the development of a child who controls the household. An assertive parent would be able to make the child understand the rights and responsibilities of the child and the parent in this relationship.

The bonding is influenced by the way the parent spends time with the children, parent's priorities and preoccupations, and by the way the child is accepted unconditionally. This bonding can be further augmented by the quality of the parent child interaction during times of stress and challenges. Thus by the time the child becomes ten and enters adolescence the parenting style becomes clear and concrete. This style of parenting determines the adolescents' happiness, outlook and personality.

#### **Four types of Parenting Styles:**

**Authoritarian:** This set of parents is highly demanding and have a lot of expectations from the child regarding hygiene, routine and performance. They are usually emotionally less responsive and tend to show less warmth in their interaction. As their expectations are high, the child may be labeled as incapable and sometimes belittled. This lowers the self esteem of the child and the child feels inadequate and remains less happy.

**Authoritative:** This set of parents is also highly demanding with lot of expectations. But they are emotionally more responsive and warm in interactions and show love and compassion. When the child is not meeting the expectations explanation, reasoning out and positive reinforcement for good behavior are practiced with better compliance from the child. Children are happy, capable and confident

**Permissive:** This set of parents has less expectations and demands from the child. The parents are emotionally very responsive and warm in their interactions with the child. The parents shower unconditional love on the child with no rules and responsibilities. Children are not happy because they feel that they do not have a person who would help them in achieving greater happiness in life. Children lack a sense of direction as they are not guided appropriately. The child feels drained because the child lacks an effective parent.

**Negligent:** This set of parents is also without expectations and demands. They are in addition emotionally non responsive and lack warmth in the interactions with the child. Children feel lonely as there is no guide and a nurturer in their lives. Children are not happy, not capable and lack self esteem and self direction.

It is clear that we as parents must be comfortable in practicing authoritative parenting style consistently and correctly and help children to grow with fulfillment, self confidence and self reliance. Both father and mother must be in agreement with each other about following authoritative style of parenting.

#### **Parents' role in the relationship with Grandparents:**

Relationship between a child and his or her grandparents is unique as there is more of nurturance and unconditional love. Grandparents are also parent figures. The grandparents are generally more loving and caring sometimes with discipline sometimes with over indulgence. Consistency in the pattern of reinforcement of positive behavior should be practiced so that the child evolves with a direction. Usually the child feels more open with grandparents as the critical eye of the grandparents is usually shut. This makes the child have space for growth and development. Parent grandparent conflicts can crop up in view of the difference in parenting style followed. Grandparents may not be consistent in the parenting style. E.g. some grandparents purchase expensive toys to see a smile on the grand child's face. Grandparents may feel that the child should not feel bad. They may follow a different parenting style from that of the parent and confuse the child. Children may become manipulative and sometimes exploit the grandparents' willingness to indulge. Parents must make the grandparents understand the authoritative style of parenting with insistence on consistency and

concurrency. Parents must be the role model in respecting the grandparents as the parents' current pattern of relationship with grandparents would be played back by the next generation. Above all parents must thank the grandparents for taking care of the children.

#### **Parents' role in the relationship with siblings:**

Majority of the current day parents give birth to two children with the expectation that there is some one for the child to depend on in the events of crisis and someone to share the happiness and accomplishments. As there is difference in age between siblings, parents tend to empathize more with the fragility and helplessness of the second one with than for the first child. This results in following different types of parenting styles for each of the children. When the older one is studying, if the younger one reaches for the pencil box and takes away an eraser, the older one uses his skills in getting the eraser back. The younger one might be disappointed and it is quiet evident on the face. A responsive parent who is upset to see the second one being disappointed might ask the older one to give the eraser to the younger one to settle the sulking. But what does this convey to the older child? The older child sees the action executed as an act of favoritism. This makes the older one feel that parents consider the younger one more closely to them than him.

It is essential that we as parents should not participate actively in the settlement of issues or conflicts between children. No child wants to harm the younger one. In fact the older siblings are extremely caring towards the younger one. But sometimes rivalry is very severe. This is usually the anger against the parents who behave differently with siblings, misdirected at the sibling. If parents do not participate in the differences between siblings, rivalry will not result in enmity. Children should be seen as equal to each other with no comparison between them. Healthy competition must be aimed with respect for each child. Sibling rivalry is preventable provided the authoritative parenting style is practiced with both children

#### **Parents' role in the relationship with friends:**

Children form early friendships around three years when they are capable of cooperative play. Majority of the early childhood friendships are made depending on the availability. School friendships are made on the basis of proximity in the class. Parents' comfort with other parents also determines the friendships in the first decade of life. As the child enters adolescence, children do not enjoy parents' involvement in the choice of friendships. The boys form friendships based on the activity they like and girls form friendships based on their comfort level with others. Girls enjoy discussing emotion filled issues with the friends. Friends might have behaviors that are of concern to parents. These may be highlighted to the children but the parents should not stop children from interacting with friends. The decision to continue the friendship should be that of the child. Children need friends and parents can never substitute this aspect of socialization. When there is not much of opportunity to make friendships many children get addicted to virtual friends through many portals of the media like cell phone, and social networking through internet. This impedes normal personality development and inhibits face to face interactions. Physical activity comes down and this makes them prone to obesity .

Friends are of both genders till ten years; with the onset of puberty, at the turn of the first decade, children become conscious of the members of opposite gender and show hatred towards them. This evolves into a phase where friends among opposite gender become more interesting than same sex friends. During middle adolescence (between 14 and 17 years) good friendships are formed and this forms the peer group who determine the code of conduct for almost all activities like what mode of transport to use to reach school to what dress to wear at a particular outing etc. During late adolescence (17 onwards) the boys and girls form intimate friendships either of the same sex or of opposite sex and this friendship usually lasts life long. Cross sex friendships are discussed in greater detail in the module on Sexuality.

Parents should be able to accept the friends of their children with open heart and arms so that the parents are seen as child friendly. Accepting the friends unconditionally enriches the bonding between parents and the child. The house must be able to receive friends at all times with any type of attire as the children expect a non judgmental attitude from the parents. When parents make themselves comfortable to shower genuine love to their children's friends with behaviors of concern, it is found that the friends turn around in a positive manner.

#### **Parents' role in the relationship with other significant adults:**

Neighbors, relatives form a large group of people with whom children come in contact with. Let children form their opinion about others. We must not influence the children. Children have the best antennae to differentiate genuine love from otherwise. Parents should respect the child's preferences. Children should be appraised of the pleasures of such relationships and must also be cautioned about the dangers especially exploitation for sexual gratification. Parents must be in a position to defend their children from negative comments; but must be forthcoming to share the children's accomplishments and positive side with others, as a compliment from significant adults contributes to the development of self esteem of the children.

Teachers are a major group of people with whom our children interact every day. Some are inspiring and motivating who make a great impact on the children's development. But some are not up to the mark. Children tend to comment on such teachers. Parents should not try to influence these opinions. Simple listening is all that is required when our children rant about the teachers. Let us not intervene without the permission of the child.

Subordinate staff like maids, drivers etc should be treated with respect by us so that children learn the value of dignity of labour. But we should not allow our children to go alone by car with a driver as it is not safe to trust the workers blindly.

Overall respect for all around us is the best role modeling we can provide for our children to develop positive relationships with all members of the microcosm in which we live.





Whenever I held my newborn baby in my arms, I used to think that what I said and did to him could have an influence not only on him but on all whom he met, not only for a day or a month or a year, but for all eternity - a very challenging and exciting thought for a mother. ~Rose Kennedy



## Communication with Children

Communication is by itself an art. Communication with our children in a positive way is a talent that we should all learn to master for better parent child bonding. We send signals to our children through various languages including body language. Right from the time of conception we have been interacting with our children in some form or the other. The most important objective of communication is to help the child evolve into a happy, confident, self reliant and an independent adult capable of making decisions either with or without the help of others around them.

The way we communicate with our babies from conception depends on the fact if it is a planned pregnancy or not. As pregnancy is seen as an elevation of status to a married couple in India, most of the pregnancies are received with a smile and happiness. The responses of the members of the extended family also influence the mood of the couple. Research has proven that the mood of the mother has major influence on the well being of the growing embryo. Hence it is essential that the mother should enjoy a sense of well being to nurture a fetus until birth.

The baby is discussed about even during early pregnancy. The entire household gets geared to the arrival of the new one. Grandparents look forward to the birth of the child and the parents make adequate preparations to receive the baby in comfort. When the baby starts moving in the uterus the mother feels the life inside. This is a thrilling moment for any mother and she usually shares this with her spouse. With a mutually fulfilling relationship with the spouse, usually both the parents enjoy the baby in the uterus by stroking the abdomen. When the baby reaches term, it is possible to feel body parts like head, back, knees etc. It is necessary that the father of the baby is pulled into enjoying these body parts during pregnancy and thus become part of the whole process of pregnancy and childbirth.

The baby in the uterus is used to the rhythm of the heartbeat and the rocking movements of the breathing act of the mother. The baby can hear the mother's voice and sometimes the father's voice if spoken at close quarters. Soft spoken gentle voice of the parents sends positive messages to the baby even when inside the uterus. As the baby becomes part of the family, the members of the household are emotionally attached to the unborn baby.

At the onset of labour, we have seen many mothers and fathers speak to the 'to be born' baby, "Please come out without giving much trouble to the mother." At birth the baby is definitely used to the voices of many people around. The first interaction by the mother is usually a caressing loving look at the baby from the distance with a smile when the baby is taken by the supporting staff for resuscitation. After resuscitation and cleaning of the baby, the baby is given to the mother for holding the baby to the bosom for warmth. This is the first touch which is loaded with multiple emotions. Since then it is an enjoyable journey of communication with our child.

What, When and How do we communicate with our children is the aim of this handout. We want to communicate unconditional love to our children at all times from birth until our last breath in this world. We must be able to communicate verbally, non verbally and through silence with our children

to show our unconditional support, encouragement and appreciation to enable them evolve into confident personalities.

In addition to caring for new born babies it is necessary that parents interact with the babies. Parents should make eye contact with the baby and interact with an intention to enjoy the baby. The baby loves the strokes while feeding, the parental touch and the funny noises made by parents during wakeful hours. Though the non verbal communication plays a bigger role now, the tone and rhythm of the voice also conveys a lot of positive feelings to the baby. The parents can also express their love by kissing and hugging the baby often. It is better the parents learn to interact with the baby when they are together as a couple as well as in an individual manner. Depending on the responses from the baby, the parents are reinforced to carry on with the interaction. A cheerful baby looks at the parent with interest and a grumpy baby is irritable irrespective of the interaction. Thus the temperament of the baby determines the quality of interaction during early infancy.

As the baby learns to smile the baby gains control over the facial muscles and communicates by gestures. A smiling baby is a joy for anyone and this is the right time for parents to enjoy as well as encourage more smiles and laughter to make the child cheerful. The baby seeks the company of the parent who makes them cheerful by calling out to them. The baby gives different cries to send different signals like hunger, wetness, discomfort or need for entertainment like amusing interaction. By now the parents are able to understand the cues and respond appropriately. It is essential the parents have a soft, pleasant response to each signal irrespective of the actual demand.

Babies are usually fed before the parents. In view of the 'gastro colic reflux' most of the babies pass motion soon after feeding. Even if the parents are eating at that point of time, it is essential that parents smile at the baby and respond by cleaning with love and affection. This gesture is important because the baby understands the emotions conveyed by parents. A disgusted parent's body language is internalized by the baby and such subtle changes in body language are sufficient to bring on bowel disturbances like constipation in the babies.

During early infancy it is necessary that parents talk with the child anything that comes to their minds by making eye contact with the baby. This is the phase of input. The babies internalize the facial gestures as well as the vocabulary used by almost all members of the house hold and also observe the pattern of communication that takes place among all others. Around the turn of the year the child comes forth with words and gestures that are to a certain extent similar to the ones used by parents. As the children are mobile and accident prone they are given many negative instructions like "No, don't touch that. No don't do that" etc. We as parents go ahead with these negative instructions because we are concerned about the safety of the children. But children do not know what is permitted and what is not permitted. It is necessary that we child proof the house and put dangerous breakable items at a higher level to communicate that they are not for children. Negative instructions should be replaced with positive instructions about what to do instead. For example if the child reaches for a glass object, it is necessary that we do not scream at the child. We should be patient

and softly ask them to give the object to us. If the child peeps out of the balcony wall, it is necessary that we do not panic and shout from a distance. It is essential that we move to the balcony slowly in unalarming manner and slowly hold the child and lift them for a better view of the scene outside and also tell the child, “Next time when you want to see outside the balcony call mama to help you out. I will show you many more beautiful things outside. When I lift you, you can see well”. This method of communication would reduce the number of negative commands. This also helps the child feel secure because he or she is rest assured that parents will be there to entertain them safely.

As the child grows up into a toddler and then a school going child the principles of communication remain the same but the method in which we approach each and every aspect would differ according to the situation and persons involved. Love based communication is the bottom line and we should strive to achieve this at all encounters with our children.

Children become inquisitive and ask many questions. Answers to many questions would be known to us but we may not know some of them. We should have the confidence to say “I do not know. Let us find out together” and make a sincere attempt to find the answers for the same. This makes the child develop confidence on the parents about the quality of knowledge they can acquire with parents’ help.

Children around this age might ask for many play things. It is essential that both parents come to a consensus about the affordability of the family and decide whether such an item can be given to the child or not. If the decision is to give the child an object by the next weekend the promise must be kept. Promises have to be kept to enable the development of trust on parents. Similarly parents will have to be honest if they are not able to get a play item. The parents cannot postpone the buying as the child loses trust on the parents. Consistency in promises between parents and among all parent figures in the household should be carefully conveyed to the child through our discussions in their midst.

With age the children become fluent in the language and are capable of handling emotions with vocalization. Thus it is essential that we are familiar with the verbal communication styles by now. We all know the four types of Communication, namely, the aggressive, assertive, passive and passive aggressive communication.

Aggressive style communicates authority without consideration of the emotions of the other person. The persons who use this style are usually manipulative in such a way that their ends are met at the expense of others interests. Empathy and love are minimal. This is the style practiced by parents who practice authoritarian parenting style where their expectations are given the priority over the child’s needs and comfort.

Passive style of communication is practiced by people who are meek and submissive and who are not capable of taking decisions by themselves. They allow others to boss around them. This style is



practiced by parents who practice permissive style of parenting. Empathy and love are there but these parents are not able to stand as good role models who can arrive at win-win responses to conflicts.

Assertive Style of Communication is by far the best style where the person communicates his or her message clearly in a manner where he or she is also open to hearing the other person's point of view. As clarity of expression is the key principle it is recommended for parents to inculcate this style of communication with all members of the household as well as outside home environment. This style of communication entertains mutual respect and thus encourages amicable settlement of disputes if any. The children learn this style by observing their parents.

Passive aggressive style is not an enjoyable style where the persons involved are not manipulative or accusatory in a visible manner but, they use non conformation or non cooperation by maintaining either silence or humor or withdrawal or sulking for prolonged periods of time. This is not a very useful style as it is difficult to understand the person's thoughts. Smiling at everything, irrelevant usage of humor, excessive praise and flattery, deviating from the topic of discussion etc are some of the methods used by people who use passive aggressive style of communication.

It is necessary that we as parents should be able to self introspect and detect our predominant style of communication. It is important that we understand what type of communication we use with whom and when. Also it is essential we analyze what we have gained and what we have lost by practicing this style of communication. We should remember that our children are watching us and they are sure to practice similar style of communication with people at similar circumstances. Infants internalize our pattern of communication into their repertoire that they use the same style with same people either verbally or non verbally by 12 to 24 months of age. Sometimes we would be surprised to know that our children use certain vocabulary not realizing that we have used such words with someone in the presence of our children. Probably this is why they said, "Child is the father of man", because we learn many of our communication errors either by seeing them in our children or when our children point them out to us.

During infancy and early childhood we have four important tasks to be achieved by communication in addition to the care that we can provide towards fulfillment of basic needs. First and foremost is communication of unconditional love, followed by language development, value inculcation and positive parenting. Unconditional love is an expression to accept and love the child for what he or she is without any modification or production of any result. Love can be showered on the baby without any restriction by lot of hugs and kisses. Love can also be shown by spending time with children. Playing with toys, tickling game, stroking them during feeding and otherwise can show the love we have for our children. Taking them for walks are also one way of communicating to our children that we value their company. But all these have to be done with undivided attention. Usage of cell phones when we go for walks with kids conveys that phone conversation is the priority over the actual child who is coming along. We have to execute our choices and fix our priorities to enjoy the mutual joy of being with our children.

We communicate with our infants to help them learn the language. Here we will have to come to a consensus with our spouse as well as the members of the extended family what should be the first language that the child should learn. If the mother tongue is the same as the language of communication by the entire household, the child will be quicker in acquiring the vocabulary. If the mother tongue differs from the language at home, we need to agree on the language of predominant communication as it becomes difficult for the child to learn two or more languages quickly. If we do not mind waiting for the child to learn the words of all three languages the child will become trilingual by three years of age if there is exposure to three languages.

Children not only learn the goodness of a language they also learn the wrong usages of the same. This is where we need to be careful about the kind of language that we use. When someone jumps across our path while driving, many of us lose control of our tongues and use vocabulary that may not be appropriate for our child. The child who listens to this may not use these words immediately but might use them at school, a few years later, when someone irritates him or her. Thus we not only transmit words, we also are responsible in inculcating values in our children through our communication pattern even without our knowledge.

Communication can be used to enhance positive parenting techniques with tools like appreciation and encouragement to our children in our day to day lives. A two year old child, who helps to brush her teeth in the morning, might reach the tooth paste by herself and replace the cap with care. The thrilled father should lift the little one and shower lot of praise and appreciation by asking all others to clap and in a chorus the entire family says, "She is a very good girl. She got the brush ready to brush her teeth all by herself." This kind of positive reinforcement helps the child in learning to develop certain skills with ease.

School going children are able to convey emotions in words as well as gestures. Similarly they are able to understand parent's statements as well as the unsaid words. They are able to interpret body language and they do not clarify the conveyed message with their parents. A child of say five years might come back from school and sit on the mother's lap directly. If the mother was dressed up to go some where she might show a sign of discomfort about receiving the child on the lap. This gesture can make the child feel rejected forever in their lives. It is essential to remember that children should have freedom to hug, kiss or jump into parent's laps at anytime of the day. Children feel that they own the parents exclusively. They feel rejected at small gestures as they are moving out of sight of parents for many hours in a day while being at school.

Everyday after school, children want to recall the day's events with happiness or sadness as the case may be. At this point of time it is necessary that parents just listen to what is being said. Any intervention or solution is necessary only if the children ask for the same. Until then parents should practice active listening without any attempt at reprimanding. In case there is any question like, "What did you do to make the other person react that way?" the child would become defensive and the true picture would not reach us. Parents should learn the art of open ended questioning, like, "What happened next? I am sure you all followed the teacher, but after that...?" These types of

questions also give the child the feeling that the parents are actively listening and are also empathetic with them. The feeling that “I am understood” is very comforting for the child.

Many children come home earlier than parents and thus hold the key to the houses. They are called as “Latch Key Kids”. They enter an empty house when they are loaded with emotions after a day at school for almost eight hours. Some children call one of their parents to speak on the phone. After a while this too stops and the child either resorts to watching television or plays on the computer with the actual emotions modified by the time the parents reach home. The immediate emotions from school are important and they should be heard. Not many children feel it important to recall the day’s events when parents are ready to hear. In any busy household the parents on coming home are so keen on completing their chores that they do not find time to interact with children about the children’s day at school. The communication is limited to mundane realities like feeding, academics as well as preparation for the next day.

Watching television together is not a good way of spending time with each other as there is no communication with each other. It can be made as the time for communication by discussing the program in a manner that is enjoyable by all at home. Critically analyzing the contents delivered by the media is an excellent way of understanding and deconstructing the media. Training our children to become media literate is a major help that we can do to our children.

In some households there are separate televisions for parents and children and thus even while relaxing there is no way that they can communicate with each other. Air conditioning has created major barriers to communication as the individual rooms are not at audible distance due to closure of the doors. Each person of the household is wedded to one screen or the other and thus is far away from each other though they may all be living under the roof of 900 sq feet premises.

As children enter adolescence the children are in the process of symbolic movement away from parental shelter. They do not listen to parents as before as they want to develop their decision making skills. Parents should understand this aspect of psychosocial development in the child and be accommodative of the distancing from them. Parents should continue to shower love as before but at a different plane. Adolescents like to be treated and respected as adults. Instead of instructions, adolescents may be given choices.

Adolescents do not enjoy public display of parental affection when they are in the midst of friends. But they do long for loving touches from parents while at home. They might want to lie down on the laps or they might want to be hugged often. They like to hear “I love you” often from parents when they are said genuinely. The boys might brush aside the words but they do enjoy the same. They enjoy a pat on their backs even if they are with friends, if the pat is given at the appropriate moment. Many adolescents enjoy the nurturing kiss on the foreheads while they are leaving for school. Internally they are fighting a battle between independence and longing for love. Such gestures give them a reassurance that the parents have not changed it is only they who have changed. Adolescents like stability as far as parental expressions are concerned, but they change every minute depending on the mood swings they have.

Verbal communication with adolescents is enjoyable if we forget the fact that we are their parents. We should be able to chat with them about anything under the sun with humor and cheer. The topics that make wonderful conversation pieces are school tournaments, the books that are commonly read by adolescents, school culturals, the school romance, the way the teachers are being ragged, others opinion about the current films, etc. Thus the conversation with adolescents has to be something other than education and daily routine. This creates the best channels of communication between the parents and adolescents. Once this is established it becomes a cake walk to parent an adolescent as the adolescents are accommodative and open to our suggestions. Only authoritative style of parenting wins in the context of assertive communication pattern.

Just accepting them the way they dress up, the way they speak, with a smile at appropriate times and speaking to them from the bottom of the heart and allowing them to make decisions regarding friends, dresses, by not being judgmental helps adolescents to feel that they are understood by their parents. Adolescents are happier to be discussing about bigger responsibilities like operating bank accounts, cleaning the car, discussing their career plans, opinions regarding drugs, sexuality. Such discussions make them feel respected and thus they come forward to share their views on each of the topic mentioned. Openness with regard to financial planning of the household is generally appreciated by adolescents as they come forward with tips to manage our accounts many times. In short, treating an adolescent as another adult in the house helps in learning from them as well as holding them to us by not allowing them to drift apart.

### **Components of Communication:**

As Dr Albert Mehrabian had observed, communication is largely non verbal, to the extent of 93%. When an individual speaks, the listener focuses only 7% on the actual words, 38% on the way the words are delivered (the tone, accent) and 55% on facial expressions. Hence parents need to sharpen both verbal as well as non verbal skills for communicating effectively with their children.

### **Verbal Skills**

Verbal skills include the spoken and written words. The golden rule of interpersonal relationships holds good here- parents should treat children in a way that they want to be treated. Parents should use the language of respect and civility with their children as words matter. Love should be conveyed in all transactions with children. Clarity of expression helps in better understanding. Whenever possible, parents should make use of short and simple messages for children as they are easy to follow.

Children usually do not like listening to long lectures and sermons and more so adolescents. So we should use 'teachable moments' while listening to radio, viewing television or reading the newspaper to deliver information and their values and expectations merged in day to day interactions. This especially holds good for teaching them about the dangers of indulging in high risk behaviour like drugs and irresponsible sexual behaviour.



We should use 'I' statements to convey feelings and expectations to children like, "I am concerned at the outcome of the current action." rather than "You are behaving badly" as 'You' statements sound accusatory and could create a resentful feeling.

We must train ourselves to ask open ended questions especially while dealing with adolescents who are not very communicative. Using humor is another good way of reaching out to children. Parents can also communicate with their children through the written word. Notes of appreciation, list of tasks to be done, reminder notes, schedule for the day and sharing feelings and thoughts through letters are some of the ways in which parents can effectively and efficiently get their message across

### **Non Verbal Skills**

As parents, we should imbibe appropriate body language or non verbal skills to convey our messages. We should also be able to pick up non verbal cues in form of expression of happiness or sorrow in our children and respond appropriately. Non verbal skills include eye contact, facial expression, position of hands and legs, body movement and physical proximity.

### **Active Listening**

Listening is very important for effective communication. By learning the skill of active listening, we can help the child to tell his story and to identify troubling issues. It will also help us to resolve conflicts with children amicably.

The four major components of active listening are:

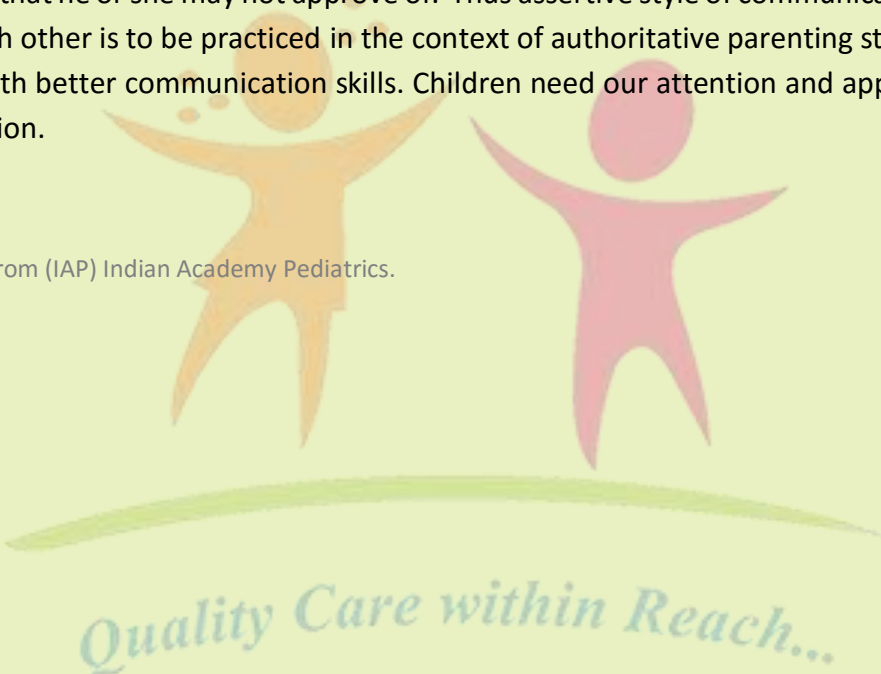
- Paying attention that includes turning the body towards the child and looking at him when he is talking as this entails listening to him in a quiet place where conversation is clearly audible.
- Usage of minimal responses that indicate to the child that the parent is listening like nod of the head or utterances like Ah-ha, Oh, Yes, OK, Right, I understand, Mmm, Hummm. Such responses encourage the child to continue to tell his story and express himself.
- Use of Reflection indicates to the child that the parent is attending to the detail and content of his story. This includes reflection of content (paraphrasing) and reflection of feelings.
- Summarizing involves picking up the most salient points in the child's description of events and reflecting these back to the child. This is particularly useful if a child has been troubled by a number of issues over a period of time and has finally decided to confide in a parent.

Can communication be negatively used by parents? The way we communicate with people who are younger to us and with people who work for us is observed by our children. If we are aggressive in these contexts our children learn the same. The second situation where we do communicate negatively is when we discuss about others. Sometimes we do discuss with negative emotions and negative words depending on the anger and remorse we have on others. It is better children do not witness such discussions and form opinions about the significant others in their family and neighborhood. There is another occasion where we lose control over our communication style is when we quarrel with our spouses. It is common for any couple to disagree with each other but let

there be maintenance of civility as this is also imbibed by our children. Children have only the parent's marriage as a template for them to emulate in future. There are many households where the parents do not speak with each other for many days. This forced silence is also a form of communication that is learnt by our children. There are certain families where emotional blackmailing is done to get things done the way the members want, for example, "I will leave the house if you do not buy this", or "I will kill myself if you do not stop doing this". Here though leaving the house and killing self are only quoted as threats, children do not understand. They assume that such threats are true and fear about the loss and abandonment of the people concerned. Though none of the above was directed at children, the children have been the innocent bystanders and they inculcate such types of communication in their lives. Sometimes children use such threats to get their way.

Effective communication with our children across ages helps us in bringing up confident individuals into this world. A child who is exposed only to aggressive style might turn out either to be aggressive or submissive willing to please all around. A child who is used to passive style of communication might become passive or might be totally chaotic as to what style to follow as there are no effective role models for them. Passive aggressive style is better discouraged from the beginning because it can be extremely annoying and it can damage relationships as nobody wants to be associated with passive aggressors. Love should be conveyed in all interactions even if we are bringing the attention of our child to a point that he or she may not approve of. Thus assertive style of communication with mutual respect for each other is to be practiced in the context of authoritative parenting style for equipping our children with better communication skills. Children need our attention and approval along with love and affection.

Reference taken from (IAP) Indian Academy Pediatrics.



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