

Strategies for Building the Foundation: Positive Communication with Children

Acknowledging is:

- Describing what we see
- Giving words to feelings
- Really listening
- Reflecting back what the child says
- Showing empathy and concern

Active Listening: Fully concentrate, understand and respond to children

- Keep conversations short and ask questions that are open-ended.
- Affirm their feelings: Just like us, children many times just want to be heard and have their feelings validated. This can be done through active listening.
- Get on their level, give eye contact, eliminate distractions, and respond with “oh, I see, uh-huh...”
- Don’t interrupt while the child is speaking. Children tend to lose their train of thought easily. Repeat what the child is essentially saying without giving advice or disagree at this point. “So, you’re telling me that...?”
- Demonstrate sincere concern
- At the end, it might be helpful to help the child label their feelings with, “That must have been (scary, frustrating, saddening, exciting).”
- End with a hug, high five, smile, etc.
- Through active listening caregivers will be more apt to hear what children are feeling and experiencing, as well as understanding their point of view. Active listening adults build trust with children in their care and encourage them to continue to share their feelings, ideas, and opinions.
- By modeling listening skills, caregivers will teach children to be effective listeners, a skill that will prove valuable throughout their lifetime. Building trust and establishing rapport.

Be Human

- Children need to know that they are not the only ones who make mistakes. We have feelings and make mistakes, too. Apologize to them when you make a mistake or hurt their feelings.
- When caregivers show children that they are human, children understand that it is okay to make mistakes and still be accepted and loved.
- This also models for children the appropriate way to share emotions and admit mistakes in the future.
- Avoid forcing children to say, “I’m sorry.” The last thing we want is to raise up children who are insincerely sorry. Instead, when they’ve offended someone, ask them if they feel sad that they hurt their friend. Let them know that this feeling sorry and that they could apologize to their friend for what happened.
- We can also model empathy towards the hurt child for both children’s learning.

Avoid Empty Praise: *Good Job. Way to go. Excellent.* Children hear these words all day long from educators and parents, but these words don’t let children know what they did well.

Instead, it’s better if we give children positive, specific feedback about their effort of accomplishments. Boosts self-esteem.

- Examples: “I like how you are playing so nice together without arguing.”
- “You really worked hard on your drawing, you used many different colors.”
- “You are taking your time with that puzzle.”
- “You cleaned up without being asked.”

Sets children up for success by allowing them to recognize their value (I am a hard worker, good reader, etc.), effort, and evaluate their own merit.

Changing Your Child's "No" to "Yes!"

The key to ending undesirable behaviors is not in controlling children, but in communicating with them in a way that they understand and will listen. Caregivers should model for children what they want to hear - respectful, positive communication. Below are some simple strategies that may help caregivers to turn resistance into cooperation and encourage positive communication between caregiver and child.



Helpful strategies building positivity:

- **The it's a big deal strategy:** Look for the positive qualities you hope your children will develop. When you see children demonstrating those qualities, recognize it with excitement and be specific! Recognizing these qualities increases the chance that you will see it again in the future!

"I saw you sharing! That was so thoughtful."

- **The positive alternative strategy:** Replace undesired behaviors with a desirable one. Instead of saying no, tell the child what to do.

Instead of "Don't run," say, "Use your walking feet, please."

Instead of "Don't yell in the house," say, "Please use your inside voice."

- **The it's your choice strategy:** Choices give children alternatives and a feeling of control in their lives. Let's be honest, young children really don't control much in their lives! By stating the preferred goal and then giving the child two choices to accomplish it, parents will increase the chance of cooperation. Be sure that you are prepared to allow their choice to fit into your routine before giving it!

"It's chilly out today. Will you wear your jacket or your sweatshirt?"

"Will you pick up your toys before lunch or after lunch?"

- **The when/then strategy:** When adults use this strategy, they are telling children what they expect in a positive way. By using when/then in statements, you communicate that you trust the child will follow through.

"When you clean up your toys, then we will go to the park."

"When you wash your hands, then we will sit down for lunch."

Caregivers who engage children in positive, respectful communication practices such as these can expect to gain the same in return. The behaviors that parents respond to positively will grow. Like a plant that is fed and watered, that which gets positive attention will thrive (Kersey & Masterson, 2011). Be patient, it takes time for old habits to fade and new ones to grow!



Building Relationships with Conversation

At each stage of a child's development the relationship between caregiver and child changes, as does the way they communicate with one another. Positive communication can help us to cultivate these relationships by asking questions about children's interests, activities, and feelings. The interest that we show in what children are involved in will help to create and maintain positive relationships. Here are few questions that we can use to start conversations with the children in our care...especially our school-agers!

Quick and easy conversation builders:

What makes you feel happy?

What was the best thing that happened today?

Where is your favorite place to visit?

What is your favorite song to sing?

If you had \$5.00 what would you do with it?

How would the world be different if animals could talk?

If you were invisible for one day, what would you do?

If you were packing a picnic lunch, what would you pack?

If you could have one super power, what would it be and why?

What's the best thing about being ____ years old?

Would you rather jump into a pool of marshmallows or a pool of jello?

Would you rather have yummy edible hair that regrew each night or have retractable wheels on the bottoms of your feet?



The best way we can learn more about the children we care for is by communicating with them. By taking the time to really get to know the children in our care we're letting them know that they are valuable and interesting people! This builds confidence and self-esteem.

Using these conversation builders, we are not only building relationships with the children we care for, but we are also promoting good communication and language skills and imagination! It takes practice to become a good communicator, but it is worth it! Good communication skills last a lifetime!

THE WRINKLED HEART ACTIVITY

1. Talking about the difference in the things we say that make people feel good or that hurt them.
2. While talking, cut a big heart from construction paper
3. After it is cut out, hold it up and tell the children that each one of us starts out with a heart that is as smooth as this one.
4. Have the children begin sharing things that someone might say that would be hurtful to someone else. With each response, crumple the heart a little more until the heart is crumpled up.
5. Tell the children that each time they say something hurtful to someone, they put a wrinkle in that person's heart.
6. Now, ask the children to say things that make someone else feel good.
7. With each response, smooth out the heart. Eventually, you will have smoothed out the hurt feelings, but the wrinkles can still be seen and felt.
8. Talk about how we each have wrinkles in our hearts from things that people have said or done to use that hurt our feelings and that the wrinkles don't ever go away completely.
11. Tell them that we want to be careful with what we say so we don't add wrinkles to anyone's heart.
12. Ask the children to write their name on a band aid and tape it to the heart to say that they will do their best not to use words or actions that hurt others.
12. Tape the heart up in the classroom as a reminder throughout the year.

