



FAMILIES TACKLING TOUGH TIMES TOGETHER



FAMILY
CHILDREN

We Share Our Feelings Constructively! Open Emotional Expression

As parents we cover difficult topics with our children. This has been especially true during the pandemic. It's important to encourage our children to share their feelings with us as they find their way through new, and sometimes difficult, territory. Positive interactions help us to share information and give comfort to our children by listening. Open communication with our children allows them to share how they feel as we listen and lets them know they are safe, even when they think life is too hard.

Listening During Play

Play can be a key component in how children understand and share their emotions. We can support our children in their play, allowing them to play without interruption and/or by joining in their play when they invite us. During play, we can listen to each other. Encouraging our children to tell us how they feel and being a good listener can help our children to handle the hard things they are experiencing and also help them to build resilience.

Activities

Infants

- Provide your infant the chance to explore their environment by laying a blanket on the floor and encouraging them to crawl around. If your infant is not mobile, consider placing a mirror beside them so they can look at themselves. As you watch and listen, respond by smiling, describing what they are doing, and talking with them. These interactions provide positive communication during their play and let infants know you are there and are listening.

Older children

- It is important to listen and answer your child's questions with honesty. But, you don't want to give them more information than they can understand. [Sesame Street Workshop offers some tips for talking to children about COVID-19.](#) Focus on supporting your child during hard talks and staying positive as you listen to their concerns.

To learn more about the science behind the benefits of communicating through play, you may wish to read the below research:

- [How do children communicate through play, and why is that Important?](#)
- [The Case of Brain Science and Guided Play: A Developing Story](#)



FAMILIES TACKLING TOUGH TIMES TOGETHER



FAMILY

YOUTH

We Share Our Feelings Constructively! Open Emotional Expression

If we think back to our teenage years, we probably prefer not to repeat them. It's hard to manage the physical, emotional, and other life changes that happen ALL AT ONCE! On top of this, life has thrown COVID-19 into the mix, causing strong emotions for teens. Fortunately, our teens can learn skills to help manage their emotions. We can support our teens and help them learn to manage their emotions while teaching them how to show compassion and [empathy](#) through being a good listener.

Being a Good Listener and Teaching Empathy

It is important for families to find ways to share thoughts and feelings with each other. We can let our teens know that we understand their emotions by showing them we care about how they feel and what they have to say. Being a good listener helps us to gain a different perspective and better understand what our teens are going through. Reacting to our teen's emotions in a positive way helps them to feel better understood.

Listening and Empathy Activities

- **Thinking about a story from a different point of view.** Encourage your teen to think of a favorite book or news article they've read. Ask them to think about the following questions: Who is telling the story? Whose point of view is the story being told from? How might the story be different if it were being told from a different character's point of view? How might the story be different if the character were a different gender or from a different country? How does point of view influence the information received?
- **Validating feelings.** Sometimes when people share feelings of fear, anger, or sadness, those they share with try to "fix" these difficult feelings. They may say things like "Don't think like that" or "Don't worry, things will get better." Listen carefully and support your teen's feelings by saying things like "I can see how you would feel that way," "It must be hard to feel that way," or "That is an awful lot to be feeling right now." Encourage your teen to validate the feelings of others as they learn how to listen and see things from a different view.
- **A minute of freedom.** Oftentimes, we edit what we say to others. Give your teen a chance to say *exactly* what they think or feel by offering them a "Minute of Freedom." Encourage your teen to do this, letting them know that there will be no consequences and you won't talk about it later. Invite your teen to enjoy their freedom (for a minute)! Keep in mind that if your teen says something that makes you think they are in danger or are planning to do something against the law, it is important to let someone know.

To learn more about the science behind teaching empathy, you may wish to read the below research:

- [The Science of Empathy](#)
- [The Emerging Study of Positive Empathy](#)



FAMILIES TACKLING TOUGH TIMES TOGETHER



FAMILY
YOUNG ADULTS

We Share Our Feelings Constructively! Open Emotional Expression

In their book “[Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters](#),” Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen (2010) begin by reminding us that we benefit most when we come at each conversation as a **learning** conversation. So often when we are in conflict with others, we think we know what they are thinking and/or about how they will respond. The interesting thing is that individuals on **both** sides of any situation are making those assumptions—so much so that a conversation may not ever occur.

Having Difficult Conversations

There is no question that difficult conversations often feel uncomfortable or even awkward. However, there are some guidelines that can help move the process forward. One critical guideline is to truly listen; pause your mind while the other person is talking and literally take in what they are saying. Take a break from the blame game.

Stone et al. (2010) do a great job of reminding us that difficult conversations are not just about what is said, but also about the emotions of the people involved. It is not simply the words we use, but also our tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, etc. No one wants to be seen as challenging or as a “problem,” and yet we all need to be seen and heard.

Video Resources

- [How Miscommunication Happens \(And How to Avoid It\)](#)
- [10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation](#)

Activities

Internal Actions

- Engage in perspective-taking or thinking about how others feel while listening to stories from/about those who have identities different from your own. This exposure could happen through reading, TV, movies, etc. Reflect on how the stories shown in these situations may be different than how you would experience them.

External Actions

- Much of the advice about having better conversations focuses on messaging, tone, and presentation style. The most important action may actually be to listen/receive the other person’s message. Active listening requires attention and effort, but it can be critical to meaningful and important conversation.

To learn more about the science behind perspective taking, you may wish to read the below research:

- [The Necessity of Others is the Mother of Invention: Intrinsic and Prosocial Motivations, Perspective Taking, and Creativity.](#)



FAMILIES TACKLING TOUGH TIMES TOGETHER



FAMILY
OLDER ADULTS

We Share Our Feelings Constructively! Open Emotional Expression

Families are stronger when they share emotions and listen to each other while showing empathy and compassion. Miscommunication between adult children and their parents can cause conflict and misunderstanding. Communicating well with older adults requires adult children to better understand what their aging parents are going through. Listening carefully to the needs and feelings of others helps us to better understand each other and better manage difficult times.

Validating While Listening

Validating is an important step in active listening. When we validate the feelings of others, we acknowledge that their feelings are worthwhile and important. Validating the thoughts and feelings of older adults helps to restore their dignity and self-worth. Validation happens as we listen closely and show that we care about what others are saying. Listening to others as they talk about their experiences can sometimes be difficult and very emotional, but it is an important part of helping them feel safe and heard.

Active Listening Techniques

- **Pay attention.** Give the speaker your undivided attention and recognize that non-verbal communication speaks loudly.
- **Show that you are listening.** Use your body language and gestures to show that you are engaged by nodding occasionally and using facial expressions.
- **Provide feedback.** Reflect on what is being said and respond by paraphrasing. “What I am hearing is...,” or “Sounds like you are saying...,” are examples of how to reflect back on what was said. You can also ask open and honest questions. Use “I” statements.
- **Defer judgement.** Allow the person talking to finish their story or finish what they are trying to say without interruptions. Deeply listening to another person is designed to encourage respect and understanding. It may also help you to gain new information and possibly hear another perspective. Treat the other person in a way that you would want to be treated.

The above techniques were adapted from [Active Listening: The Art of Empathetic Conversation](#).

Additional Resources

- The Institute on Aging’s guidance on active listening: [Active Listening: How Caregivers Can Make Communicating with Older Adults Easier](#).
- Validation therapy and Alzheimer’s: [Namoi Feil, Validation Therapy, and Alzheimer’s](#).
- A video about communication through empathy: [Validation, Communication Through Empathy](#).

To learn more about the science behind effectively communicating with older adults, you may wish to read the below research:

- [Validation Therapy for Dementia](#)



FAMILIES TACKLING TOUGH TIMES TOGETHER



We Share Our Feelings Constructively! Open Emotional Expression

During times of stress, families may go through changes to their daily life. When families communicate clearly about these changes through family discussions, all family members can work together to get through hard times and agree on how to address these changes. Clear, compassionate communication and deep listening helps families take action together while building trust and respect.

The Circle Process: Listening and Speaking with Purpose

Relationships are better when people are able to easily share their needs directly and clearly. Listening to the needs of others allows us to show empathy and validate how others may feel. The Circle Process is a method for solving problems and building community through communication. Listening is an important part of the process and requires us to make space for others to talk and to deeply listen.

The Circle Process Activity

Dialogue or peacemaking circles are gatherings where all participants sit in a circle facing each other to have open and direct communication. These circles can be used to encourage better communication between family members.

The Circle Process has three practices:

- **Speaking with intention:** Noting what is important to the conversation in the moment.
- **Listening with attention:** Respectful of the learning process for all members of the group.
- **Tending to the well-being of the circle:** Remaining aware of the impact of contributions.

In many circles, a “talking piece” is used to help facilitate communication. This object, such as a beanbag or stick, is used to ensure that no one else is talking except for the person holding it. The Circle Process can also be used for community conversations. In a community gathering, social distancing guidelines should be observed. Each person should also provide their own talking piece.

Before the activity, invite family members to decide on several questions they want to ask. Examples may include:

- What change would you like to see in your family or community? What can you do to promote that change?
- Name a time when you were outside of your comfort zone. What did you do, and what were the results?
- What are you worried or concerned about? Do you know anyone who is impacted by this? What has been hardest for you? What do you think needs to be done to make things right?

The above activity was adapted from: [Peacemaking Circles](#) and [The Circle Way](#).

To learn more about the science behind the benefits of circle dialogues, you may wish to read the below research:

- [Introducing Healing Circles and Talking Circles into Primary Care.](#)