

Happy families work together

“Dad, will you tell Tina not to come into my room?” Twelve-year-old Luke was complaining about his six-year-old sister. Luke’s Dad, Robert, had only just got home and was still hanging up his coat. “Dad! She’s bugging me!” called Luke as he led Tina by the hand into the lounge room. “A ‘hello’ would be nice,” said Robert. “Yeah, hi. I’m trying to do my science project. I need my space,” Luke replied. “Tina, how about you stay out here with me?” Robert suggested. Tina was not very keen on this idea. “But I want to play and you’ll be too busy,” she whined. “Here we go again”, thought Robert. “If only we all got on better.”

Managing family relationships so that everyone’s most important needs get met can be hard work. All families have times when tempers get frayed, feelings get hurt and misunderstandings occur. Maintaining positive connections when these things happen requires good communication and creative management.

Effective communication means that everyone has a say and is listened to. This can be a challenge in busy families. Pressure to get things done can mean there seems to be little ‘quality time’ for talking and listening to each other. Whether or not time is a problem, negative styles of communication often undermine relationships. This occurs, for example, when family members speak to each other disrespectfully or use put-downs.

Building positive family relationships does not mean having no conflict. Dealing with conflicts positively, as well as making time to relax and do fun things together, help to strengthen family relationships.

Set the tone for positive communication

Research on communication in families shows the importance of parents and carers communicating warmth and caring *and also* setting clear expectations for children’s behaviour. Making time for family members, communicating effectively and supporting each other are important ways of strengthening families and building positive relationships.

Parents and carers can set a positive tone for communication through their own example. The way you listen, and the attention and importance you give to what family members say, is as important as what you say to them and how you say it. This may not always be easy, especially when you are tired or busy and have to deal with complaining or conflict. However, listening and acknowledging others’ feelings and wants helps to reduce conflict and improves communication.



Working together as a family

Discussing things as a family is often very helpful for dealing with concerns and negotiating solutions to conflicts before they get bigger.

- Talking together provides an opportunity to clarify roles and expectations.
- Be sure to talk about what is working well in family relationships and not just the difficulties.
- Build trust in family discussions by respecting and listening to everyone's views without judging or putting them down.
- Encourage children as well as adults to hear and understand each other's views and needs.

Discussing things as a family can encourage children as well as adults to solve problems creatively. For example, once he understands that Tina just wants him to play with her, 12-year-old Luke might negotiate to spend a half-hour playing with her after dinner in exchange for her giving him uninterrupted time to get on with his homework. Having a chance to express needs in positive ways encourages healthy communication, support and cooperation.

Things to discuss

- Set up chores roster
- Tina wants to play more
- Luke wants space when he has to do schoolwork
- Dad (Robert) wants more hellos and hugs



Listening and talking

It is easier for others to listen and accept your point of view when the way you say it communicates respect and care. For example, Robert could say to Luke, "I know you had to get your science project done but I still want you to say 'hello' when I come home." This shows that Robert understands Luke's position, and wants Luke to understand his.

Small things, like saying, "How was your day?" and really listening to the answer, make a difference to the quality of communication in families. Saying sorry when you make a mistake or hurt someone's feelings is also really important.

Ways to build caring family relationships

- Show affection (eg hugs and kisses)
- Offer help and support
- Do fun things and laugh together
- Make time to talk
- Really listen to each other

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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