

## Communication

### 1. Communication Charades

Play a game at the dinner table. Ask everyone to take turns saying a phrase (such as "Don't you look nice today" or "What a good idea!") with different facial expressions and in different tones of voice. Show how the same words can come across as very sincere, sarcastic, rude, angry, etc., depending on your tone of voice and body language. Talk about how communication is made up of words, tone, and body language. **Levels: 1 2 3**

Playing a family game of charades is always a fun way to focus on nonverbal communication skills. **Levels: 1 2 3**

### 2. Basic Communication Skills

Teach children to become better listeners by reading them a story and asking them questions about it (where was the treasure hidden, etc.). **Level: 1** Ask older youth a few questions and after they respond, repeat back to them the answers they gave you. Role-model by staying quiet while they are answering and maintain eye contact. **Levels: 1 2 3**

Learning not to interrupt conversation can be taught by practicing with youth to wait until the speaker completes a sentence or thought, then saying "Pardon me, or excuse me." **Levels: 1 2**

### 3. Getting Clarification/Asking Open-Ended Questions

When your youth says something to you about how their day went, rephrase what they said to you and ask for more information. For example, if your youth says "I hate school, I'm never going back," try saying, "It sounds like something really bad must have happened at school today. Can you tell me about it?" Tell them that you are getting clarification and information to understand them better. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

## Watch Yourself In Action

If your youth is having trouble with some part of communication (like telling someone they are angry or saying how they feel about something), have them practice in front of a mirror or with a video camera. Ask the youth what they think about how they're coming across (too negative or too indecisive a tone of voice, respectful, non-blaming of the other person, attaching a positive comment to a negative, etc.) and have them practice to improve their skills. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

### 4. A Pat On The Back

Have a "complimentary dinner" some night at the table. Have each person give a compliment to the person on his or her right (or to everyone). Talk about whether the compliments sounded sincere and about how the person getting the compliment reacted. Have youth practice just saying "thank you" when someone gives them a compliment instead of just playing it down. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

**5. You've Got The Look**

Teach your youth about the different "looks" or cues you might give them when they are behaving inappropriately. Tell them that when you are in public, you don't want to embarrass them by saying something, but you don't want them to embarrass you or themselves, either, so if they're behavior is out of line, you will give them a certain look or signal so they know to stop. **Levels: 1 2 3**

**6. There's More Than One Way To Communicate**

If you have a youth that has a hard time expressing emotions, write notes to them. Either sit near them and write notes back and forth about how they're feeling, what's wrong, etc., or leave a note in their room or write back and forth to each other in a journal. Writing can be less threatening because tone of voice and eye contact are not involved. It also allows us to think through what we want to say before we "say" it. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

**7. A Message For You**

If your youth doesn't respond well to verbal directions to do a chore or take care of something, give it to them in writing. Put a chalkboard in their room or in the kitchen. Write down what you need them to do each day or week and train them to "check their messages." You won't have to hear the complaints or watch the eye-rolling when they see what they need to do. Ask them to leave messages for you too. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

**8. Practice Makes Perfect**

Before your youth enters a new social setting (first day of school, party at a friend's house, meeting new people), coach your youth on how they might act. Role-play the situation with them and talk about their eye contact, body language and words they use. Youth who are especially shy may need ideas for things to talk about, like the weather or a current event. With young children, you can act out the situation using dolls, action figures or animals. This is important to do so that youth can feel comfortable about what they'll say and how they'll act. **Levels: 1 2 3**

**9. Talking To Different People**

At the dinner table, ask your youth what they would say if they needed some information from a policeman vs. a preacher vs. their best friend. Emphasize how it's appropriate to communicate differently with different people depending on their role and the relationship we have with them. **Levels: 1 2**

**10. Communications With The Teacher**

Consider taking your youth along to a parent-teacher conference, especially if the youth is having problems in the classroom. Help your youth hear the teacher's feedback and talk to them about possible solutions to the problems they are having. This

develops assertiveness and teaches the youth proper ways to communicate with a teacher. **Levels: 1 2 3**

### **11. Communication On The Job**

Take advantage of youth employment and volunteer programs in your community. Not only will your youth learn new job skills, they will also gain experience communicating with someone in an employer role. **Levels: 2 3**

### **12. Communication For An Interview**

Before your youth goes for a job interview, conduct a mock interview where you each take turns playing the employer and employee. Point out where your youth could improve communication through eye contact, not using slang, body posture, etc., and have your youth do the same for you! **Levels: 3 4**

### **13. Using Communication Tools Correctly**

Before allowing your youth to answer the phone in your home, go over with them what you want them to say when they answer, what to say if the caller asks for you and you're not home, how to take a message, etc. Tell them what kind of information they should never give out to someone they don't know (address, credit card information, whether they are alone).

Role-play answering different types of calls until they can do it correctly. Make sure to demonstrate how to handle sales people on the phone. Go over similar information for usage of e-mail and the Internet. **Levels: 1 2 3**

### **14. Making A Request Develops Assertiveness**

Youth often try to "hint" at what they want, or sometimes they just expect you to read their minds. For example, they might say, "Boy that cake looks good." and expect you to offer them some instead of saying, "May I please have a piece of cake?" If they do this, tell them you won't respond until they make a clear, direct request. **Levels: 1 2**

### **15. Learning To Negotiate**

It's important for youth to learn to negotiate with others. If you sense that your youth feels upset about something they've been asked to do, or the time frame they need to do it in, teach them how to politely ask if something can be changed. For example, if you've told them to go clean up their room in the middle of their favorite TV show and they are upset, suggest that they ask you (nicely) if they can do it right after the show. If it's okay with you, let them do it the way they are suggesting. Explain that while it's fine to ask, not everything is negotiable - sometimes they will just have to do what you say when you say it. **Levels: 1 2 3**

### **16. Managing Conflict**

When siblings are fighting, it is often a good idea to let them work out the problem on their own. However, this is not possible when the conflict becomes too intense or even violent. If you need to step in, send each youth to a separate area for a specified time, then bring them back together to discuss the problem. Help them think of all the ways they could solve their problem, even silly ways (flip a coin, pick a number between 1 and 10, let each get their way for a certain amount of time). **Levels: 1 2 3**

### **17. After A Conflict**

After a conflict involving anyone in your home, make sure that everyone (adults too) apologizes to each other. You might want to do a "group hug" or "high-fives" as a way of affirming that you're still a family, even if there are fights and disagreements. If someone has damaged or destroyed someone else's property during a conflict, give that person the chance to make things right by replacing the object with their allowance or doing chores for the other person. If the conflict was with a teacher, school mate, or someone outside the home, help the youth to write a letter to apologize and take responsibility for their part in the conflict.

**Levels: 1 2 3 4**

### **18. Talking About Sensitive Topics**

Sometimes it is difficult to discuss conflicts or sensitive topics face to face. Use time spent driving in the car or working on a puzzle with your youth to discuss difficult issues - a more casual atmosphere may help your youth to be more open. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

### **19. Family Meetings Address Conflict**

Hold regular family meetings where members have a chance to talk about the things that are stressing them out. Ask what family members are upset about and how members can do things differently to be less upsetting. Have a policy that family members can say whatever they want to, as long as they say it in a respectful manner. Make sure to end meetings on a positive note by having each member say something positive about the others. Order pizza or have popcorn to make the meeting a special occasion. **Levels: 1 2 3**

### **20. What Is Anger**

Many dramas on TV or video show people fighting, destroying things, or otherwise acting out their anger. As you watch one of these shows with your youth, talk about anger (what makes you angry, what makes them angry, how each of you tends to handle it, etc.). Talk about (and role-model for your kids) some of the ways that people can handle anger appropriately (counting to ten, giving yourself a time out, shooting hoops, running, writing in a journal, working with clay, pounding your fists into a pillow) and help them think of ways that would make sense for them. **Levels: 1 2 3**

## **Relationships**

### 1. Types Of Healthy Relationships

Draw an "Eco-Map" with your youth. Put their name in the center of a small circle. Around the circle, draw a series of circles that represent all the relationships they have. Write the names or roles of those closest to them in the circle that goes around their name, then do the same for all the other circles moving outward. For example, in the circle around their name, you might list the names of family members. The next circle might have names of their friends, the next their teachers, then their caseworkers, therapist, pastor, etc. Talk about the relationships they have with each person or group of people, (how "close" they are, how much personal information they share, how much they trust each person). Ask your youth who they consider to be part of their "support system" - people they would go to for help with a problem. Let the youth lead you in this exercise - what you think about who is closest to them might not be what they think.

**Levels: 1 2 3 4**

### 2. Characteristics Of Healthy Relationships

As you watch TV programs or videos that show people in friendships or dating relationships, talk about the qualities of a good friend, what's "healthy" in a good relationship, etc. Ask your youth to point out the things that people might do in the programs/videos that are not healthy (manipulate, make you feel guilty, lie to you, etc.), as well as the positive things.

**Levels: 1 2 3 4**

#### Tip

One important way that children learn about healthy relationships is by

seeing them in action. Talk to your youth about what makes your friendship or your marriage work well. Tell them about qualities you admire in friends or your spouse and share how you handled difficulties in a positive way.

### 3. Handling An Unhealthy Relationship

As you watch TV programs with your youth that show people in "unhealthy" relationships, talk about how characters in these programs handle each relationship and other options they could try. Discuss what your youth could do if they found themselves in an unhealthy relationship (get counseling with the person involved, get a restraining order, end the relationship). You may want to tell them about an experience you had with an unhealthy relationship and what you did or wished you had done to resolve it.

**Levels: 1 2 3**

### 4. How Would You Feel?

When your youth is distressed about a negative interaction with another person, ask them to "act it out" with you once they have cooled off. Have the youth play the part of the other person, while you pretend to be the youth. After role-playing, ask your youth

how the other person may have felt and why they have behaved as they did. This teaches youth empathy and how to see things from another person's viewpoint. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

**5. Practice For Dating**

Take your youth out on a practice "date" and model how a person taking them out should behave, as well as how your youth should behave. Dads can talk to their daughters about how a boy should behave on a date; moms can talk to their sons about what a girl should/should not do too. **Levels: 1 2 3**

**6. Dating Advice**

Have older siblings talk to younger youth about the "real world of dating," including what's appropriate behavior and what's not. **Levels: 2 3**

**7. Setting Boundaries**

Teach your children that it is okay to ask for more information from an adult. Youth who have been in the foster care system have usually had many different adults they don't know well involved in their life (caseworkers, transportation people, etc.). If someone they don't know calls or approaches them, let them know they can ask for identification or call you or another trusted person to check things out. **Levels: 1 2 3**

**8. Handling Personal Questions**

If your youth comes from another home, talk with them about what they can say to people who ask if you're their "real" parent or other personal questions. Teach them that it is a good thing not to tell their life story to everyone they meet and that they do not have to answer personal questions. Role-play different situations with them so that they feel comfortable with how they will respond. Help them to see that some information is private; model this for them by not telling them about your personal troubles, marital problems, etc.

**Levels: 1 2 3**

**9. Don't Touch Me!**

Sometimes youth who have been in the foster care system have had bad experiences with physical touch. If you have a youth who won't engage in physical interaction, start with non-threatening kinds of touch. Young children can play games involving touch like "Patty Cake" or "Red Rover." Older youth might be receptive to "high-fives." Youth who won't give or receive hugs might need to start with handshakes. **Levels: 1 2 3**

**10. Learning About Physical Boundaries**

Some youth in the foster care system have poor physical boundaries - they'll hug or

touch everyone or do it inappropriately. If this sounds like your youth, start by sharing with them how it makes you feel. "I feel uncomfortable when you hug me that way." Enlist the help of other people in their life (teachers, youth group workers, etc.) to help give feedback and set limits with your youth. For instance, the teacher might need to tell your youth he can't hug her, but he can shake her hand. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

**Tip**

Many times kids will tell us about situations where they believe they were a "victim" or where someone "wronged" them. We may easily see how the youth's behavior led to the negative interactions, but they may be totally unaware. Try asking them what they wanted to accomplish in the situations and what they could have said or done differently that might have led to a different outcome. Help them see that they are not always just a helpless victim, but that their behavior plays a part in how others treat them, and that by changing their behavior, they might get the results they want.

**11. Maintaining A Personal Support System**

Talk with your youth about different scenarios where they might need help (finding housing or a job, an unplanned pregnancy, a religious question, an illness). Ask them who they could go to for help in each of these situations. Give them a small notebook or address book to write down names and addresses of people in their personal support system. If they don't know who is part of their support system, help them think through the people that have given them help at different times. **Levels: 3 4**

**12. Being Part Of A Community**

As part of drawing an Eco-Map with your youth (Relationship Activity #1), have them write down all the different groups or communities of which they are a part of (school, church, clubs, etc.). Ask them to list some of the benefits they get from each group. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**

**13. Leisure Time**

Encourage your youth to participate in sports or other hobbies. If a youth joins your family later in life and doesn't have any hobbies, talk with them about what they like to do or something they have always wanted to try. Help them look in the newspaper or on the Internet for community classes or groups they might want to join. If they're really having trouble finding something, offer to take a photography, pottery, dance, or other class with them in the evening or during the summer. **Levels: 1 2 3 4**