

Lessons Learned About Talking *With* Kids



To help another, it is of great value and in many instances essential to know what the other is thinking and feeling. The most direct way to find this out is for the person to tell you. But, individuals probably won't tell you such things unless they think you will listen carefully. And the way to convince them of this is to listen carefully.

Of course, you won't always hear what you would like.

Helper: *Well, Jose, how do you like school?*

Jose: *Closed!*

In general, effective communication requires the ability to carry on a *productive dialogue*, that is, to talk with, not at, others. This begins with the ability to be an active (good) listener and to avoid prying and being judgmental. It also involves knowing when to share information and relate one's own experiences as appropriate and needed. The following are suggestions for engaging youngsters in productive dialogues.

I. Creating the Context for Dialogues

- Create a private space and a climate where the youngster can feel it is safe to talk.
- Clarify the value of keeping things confidential.
- Pursue dialogues when the time, location, and conditions are right.
- Utilize not just conferences and conversations, but interchanges when working together (e.g. exploring and sampling options for learning).

II. Establishing Credibility (as someone to whom it is worth talking)

- Respond with *empathy, warmth, and nurturance* (e.g., the ability to understand and appreciate what others are thinking and feeling, transmit a sense of liking, express appropriate reassurance and praise, minimize criticism and confrontation).
- Show *genuine regard and respect* (e.g., the ability to transmit real interest, acceptance, and validation of the other's feelings and to interact in a way that enables others to maintain a feeling of integrity and personal control).
- Use active and undistracted listening.
- Keep in mind that you want the student to *feel* more competent, self-determining, and related to you (and others) as a result of the interchange.

III. Facilitating Talk

- Avoid interruptions.
- Start slowly, avoid asking questions, and minimize pressure to talk (the emphasis should be more on conversation and less on questioning).
- Encourage the youngster to take the lead.
- Humor can open a dialogue; sarcasm usually has the opposite effect.
- Listen with interest.
- Convey the sense that you are providing an opportunity by extending an invitation to talk and avoiding the impression of another demanding situation (meeting them "where they are at" in terms of motivation and capability is critical in helping them develop positive attitudes and skills for oral communication).
- Build on a base of natural, informal inter-changes throughout the day.
- When questions are asked, the emphasis should be on open-ended rather than Yes/No questions.
- Appropriate self-disclosure by another can disinhibit a reluctant youngster.
- Pairing a reluctant youngster with a supportive peer or small group can help.
- Train and use others (aides, volunteers, peers) to (1) enter into productive (nonconfidential) dialogues that help clarify the youngster's perceptions and then (2) share the information with you in the best interests of helping.
- For youngsters who can't seem to convey their thoughts and feelings in words, their behavior often says a lot about their views; based on your observations and with the idea of opening a dialogue, you can share your perceptions and ask if you are right.
- Sometimes a list of items (e.g. things that they like/don't like to do at school/after school) can help elicit views and open up a dialogue.
- When youngsters have learning, behavior, and emotional problems, find as many ways as feasible to have positive interchanges with them and make positive contacts outweigh the negatives.
- **Remember:** Short periods of silence are part of the process and should be accommodated.