



## FAMILY FOCUS

# Improving Interpersonal Communication

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The Texas A&M University System

**W**hat is interpersonal communication? It is the communication that takes place between people.

By improving our skills in interpersonal communication we can also improve our relationships with others. All of us have room for improvement in these areas.

What can we do to improve our skills in interpersonal communication? First, and most important, we have to want to improve. It is not enough just to agree that it is a good idea. We have to really want to know and understand ourselves and others better.

### Begin with Self-Understanding

What are your own true feelings, attitudes and opinions? Do you try to understand what motivates you and why you act as you do? Do your patterns or habits of communicating actually express what you intend? The more you understand about yourself, the better you will be able to communicate with others.

### Work at Understanding Other People

Understanding yourself will make this easier. Recognize that all people need to feel accepted and valued by others. We all need to feel good about ourselves. People appear to be different because they have different ways of acting and communicating.

Empathy is being able to relate to another person's feelings and viewpoints, even when you disagree. We can not actually experience the same things another person has experienced, but we can try to understand others by allowing them to tell us about their feelings.



***Understanding others improves your ability to communicate.***

### Be Alert to the Elements of Communication

- Verbal communication—the words we say.
- Nonverbal communication, or body language—facial expressions, gestures, mannerisms, voice tones, and actions.

Verbal and nonverbal communication can be positive or negative; sometimes they are both at the same time. For example, have you ever heard someone say he'll be glad to do something, but in a tone of voice that says he really isn't glad at all? Some experts say that our nonverbal communication tells more about our real feelings than the words we say. Pay attention to your own nonverbal communication.

We all have negative feelings sometimes, feelings such as fear, anger, jealousy, irritation and frustration. When such an emotion is expressed toward you, you might be tempted to react negatively, too. Instead, try to understand why the other person is being negative and respond in an understanding, constructive way.

## Be Open to Others

The people we know and understand best are those who are open with us and willing to share their thoughts and ideas honestly. We also should be open with others so that they can know and understand us. However, each of us has very private thoughts that we do not need to share with most people.

## Practice Meaningful Conversation

Some conversations with others are too brief for anything but small talk. Sometimes, though, we have opportunities to really get to know other people. That is when we can share ideas and feelings, hopes, dreams and fears. We can explore opinions and attitudes. This kind of conversation is more than just a routine way of passing time. It is a way of making friends.

## Practice Effective Listening

One of the most important skills of interpersonal communication is being a good listener. There is a time to speak and a time to listen. When we are speaking and trying to express our ideas, we are very active and involved. We should be just as involved when we listen to others. Here are tips for becoming a good listener:

1. *Stop talking.* You can't listen while you are talking.
2. *Get rid of distractions.* Avoid "fiddling" with things. Get away from unnecessary noise such as a TV or radio.
3. *Look at the other person.* The face, eyes and hands all help to convey messages. Help the speaker know that you are listening. Smile, nod or respond as appropriate.
4. *Concentrate on the message.* Focus your attention on what the person is saying. Listen to how it is said. The person's attitudes and emotions may have as much meaning as the words that are spoken.



### ***Concentrating on the message improves listening.***

5. *Leave your personal emotions aside.* Try to put aside your own worries, fears or problems while listening. They can distract you from listening well.
6. *Share responsibility for communication.* You, the listener, have an important role. When you don't understand, ask for an explanation. Don't give up too soon or interrupt needlessly. Give the speaker time to express what he has to say.
7. *Don't let your thoughts get ahead of the speaker.* You can listen (think) much faster than another person can talk. Avoid making assumptions about what he will say, or jumping ahead. Instead, as the person is speaking think about the meaning of the words and remember what is said.
8. *Avoid hasty judgments.* Don't jump to conclusions. Wait until the speaker has finished.
9. *Don't argue mentally.* Hear the other person out before you decide how to respond.
10. *Respond to the message, not the person.* Don't allow your feelings about the person to affect your interpretation of what he is trying to say.

Remember that improving your interpersonal communication skills requires an extra bit of your time and energy. It takes patience, concern, effort, practice, and sometimes even courage. The results should be well worth the effort.

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