

A Guide for
Effective Communication
*with useful tips for families working with
schools or other agencies*



Parents Reaching Out
Your One Stop Resource for a Stronger Family

Parents Reaching Out believes that all families care deeply about their children and at times, families may need tools and support to accomplish their dreams. Families tell us that the tools that have been most useful are the tips for communicating with others. We developed this booklet as one more tool for your toolbox.

The information has been adapted from materials shared with permission by CADRE, The National Center on Dispute Resolution funded by the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

"We all use language to communicate, to express ourselves, to get our ideas across, and to connect with the person to whom we are speaking.

When a relationship is working, the act of communicating seems to flow relatively effortlessly.

When a relationship is deteriorating, the act of communicating can be as frustrating as climbing a hill of sand."

- Chip Rose, attorney and mediator

On a daily basis we work with people who have different opinions, values, beliefs, and needs than our own. Our ability to exchange ideas with others, understand other's perspectives and solve problems depend on how effectively we are able to communicate with others.

3 Ways We Communicate

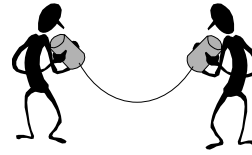
1. Verbal Messages - the words we choose
2. Paraverbal Messages - how we say the words
3. Nonverbal Messages - our body language

These three components are used to:

- Send clear, concise messages: and
- Receive and correctly understand messages that are sent to us.

Sending Messages

Verbal Messages



Effective Verbal Messages:

- *Are brief, succinct, and organized.*
- *Are free of jargon.*
- *Do not create resistance in the listener.*

Nonverbal Messages:

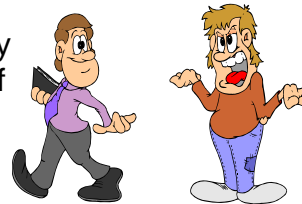
1. Account for about 55% of what is perceived and understood by others.
2. Are conveyed through our facial expressions as well as our postures and gestures.
3. Through our body language, we are always communicating, whether we want to or not!

You cannot not communicate.

Nonverbal messages are the primary way that we communicate emotions:

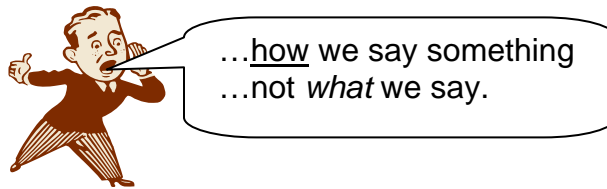
Facial Expression: The face is perhaps the most important conveyor of emotional information. *The "eyes" have it!* The eyes are particularly expressive in showing joy, sadness, anger, or confusion.

Postures and Gestures: Our body postures can create a feeling of warm openness or cold rejection.



Paraverbal Messages

1. Account for about 38% of what is perceived and understood by others.
2. Include the tone, pitch, and pacing of our voice.



Here are some points to remember:

- When we are angry or excited, our speech tends to become more rapid and higher pitched.
- When we are bored or feeling down, our speech tends to slow and take on a monotone quality.
- When we are feeling defensive, our speech is often abrupt.

The Importance of Consistency

In all of our communications we want to strive to send consistent verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal messages. When our messages are inconsistent, the listener may become confused. Inconsistency can also create a lack of trust and undermine the chance to build a good working relationship.

When a person sends a message with conflicting verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal information, the nonverbal information tends to be believed.

Consider the example of someone, through a clenched jaw, hard eyes, and steely voice, telling you they're not mad.

Which are you likely to believe?

What you see or what you hear?

Receiving Messages

Listening

The key to receiving messages effectively is listening. Listening is a combination of hearing what another person says and psychological involvement with the person who is talking. Listening requires more than hearing words. It requires a desire to understand another human being, an attitude of respect and acceptance, and a willingness to open one's mind to try and see things from another's point of view.



Listening

1. Requires concentration and energy
2. Involves a psychological connection with the speaker
3. Includes a desire and willingness to try and see things from another's perspective
4. Requires that we suspend judgment and evaluation

"...In true listening, we reach behind the words, see through them, to find the person who is being revealed. Listening is a search to find the treasure of the true person as revealed verbally and nonverbally."

- John Powell, theologian

Learning to be an effective listener is a difficult task for many people. However, the specific skills of effective listening behavior can be learned. It is our ultimate goal to integrate these skills into a sensitive and unified way of listening.

Key Listening Skills

Nonverbal:

Giving full physical attention to the speaker;

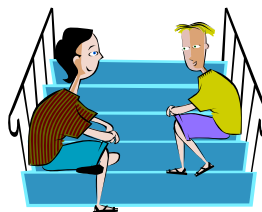
Being aware of the speaker's nonverbal messages;

Verbal:

Paying attention to the words and feelings that are being expressed;

Using reflective listening tools such as paraphrasing, reflecting, summarizing, and questioning to increase understanding of the message and help the speaker tell his story.

- Giving full physical attention to the speaker
- Leaning gently towards the speaker;
- Facing the other person squarely;
- Maintaining an open posture with arms and legs uncrossed;
- Maintaining an appropriate distance between us and the speaker;
- Moving our bodies in response to the speaker (appropriate head nodding, facial expressions).



Being Aware of the Speaker's Nonverbal Messages

When we pay attention to a speaker's body language we gain insight into how that person is feeling as well as the intensity of the feeling. We are able to develop hunches about what the speaker (or listener) is communicating. We can use reflective listening to check these hunches.

Paying Attention to the Words and Feelings

In order to understand the total meaning of a message, we must be able to gain understanding about both the feeling and the content of the message.

If we don't address the emotional aspect, we risk missing important information about the problem and we may derail the communication process.



Reflective Listening Skills

Reflective listening or responding is the process of restating, in our words, the feeling and/or content that is being expressed and is part of the verbal component of sending and receiving messages. By reflecting back to the speaker what we believe we understand, we validate that person by giving them the experience of being heard and acknowledged. We also provide an opportunity for the speaker to give us feedback about the accuracy of our perceptions, thereby increasing the effectiveness of our overall communication.

Paraphrasing - This is a concise statement of the content of the speaker's message. The paraphrase should be in the listener's own words rather than "parroting back", using the speaker's words.

"You believe that Jane needs an instructional assistant because she isn't capable of working independently."

"You would like Bob to remain in first grade because you think the activities would be more developmentally appropriate."

"You do not want Beth to receive special education services because you think it would be humiliating for her to leave the classroom at any time."

"You want to evaluate my child because you think he may have an emotional disability."

Reflecting Feeling - The listener concentrates on the feeling words and asks, "How would I be feeling if I was having that experience?" and then restates or paraphrases the feeling of what he has heard in a manner that conveys understanding.

"You are very worried about the impact that an evaluation might have on Lisa's self esteem".

"You are frustrated because dealing with Ben has taken up so much of your time, you feel like you've ignored your other students."

"You feel extremely angry about the lack of communication you have had in regards to Joey's failing grades."

"You're upset because you haven't been able to get in touch with me when I'm at work."

Summarizing - The listener pulls together the main ideas and feelings of the speaker to show understanding. This skill is used after a considerable amount of information sharing has gone on and shows that the listener grasps the total meaning of the message. It also helps the speaker gain an integrated picture of what she has been saying.

"You're frustrated and angry that the assessment has taken so long and confused about why the referral wasn't made earlier since that is what you thought had happened. You are also willing to consider additional evaluation if you can choose the provider and the school district will pay for it".

"You're worried that my son won't make adequate progress in reading if he doesn't receive special services. And you feel that he needs to be getting those services in the resource room for at least 30 minutes each day because the reading groups in the classroom are bigger and wouldn't provide the type of instruction you think he needs."

More Verbal Communication Tools

Questioning - the listener asks open-ended questions (questions which can't be answered with a yes or a no) to get information and clarification. This helps focus the speaker on the topic, encourages the speaker to talk, and provides the speaker with the opportunity to give feedback.

"Can you tell us more about Johnny's experience when he's in the regular classroom?"

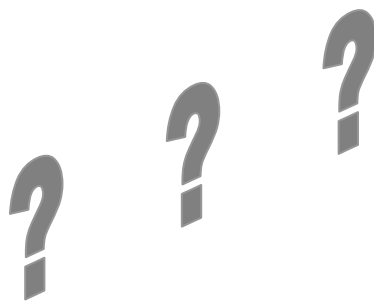
"How was it for Susie when she rode the special ed. bus for those two weeks?"

"Tell us more about the after school tutoring sessions that you offer."

"What kinds of skills do you think it's important for Jim to learn in a social skills class?"

"Could you explain why you think it's difficult for Ben to be on the playground for an hour?"

"I'm confused - are you worried that the testing may mean time out of the classroom for Jim or is there something else?"



Barriers to Effective Communication

When people are under stress, they are more apt to inject communication barriers into their conversation.

Verbal Communication Barriers

1. Attacking (interrogating, criticizing, blaming, shaming)

"If you were doing your job and supervising Susie in the lunch line we probably wouldn't be in this situation, would we?"



"Have you followed through with the counseling we asked you to do? Have you gotten Ben to the doctor's for his medical checkup? Did you call and arrange for a Big Brother? Have you found out if you're eligible for food stamps?"

"From what I can see, you don't have the training to teach a child with ADHD. Obviously, if you did, you would be using different strategies that wouldn't make her feel like she's a bad person."

2. "You Messages" (moralizing, advising, diagnosing)

"You don't seem to understand how important it is for your child to get this help. Don't you see that he's well on his way to becoming a sociopath?"

"You obviously don't realize that if you were following the same steps we do at home you wouldn't be having this problem. You don't seem to care about what's going on in this child's life outside of school."

3. Showing Power (ordering, threatening, commanding)

"If you don't voluntarily agree to this evaluation we can take you to due process. Go ahead and file a complaint if you want to."

"I'm going to write a letter of complaint to the superintendent and have this in your file if you don't stop humiliating my son in front of his classmates. I know my rights."



4. Other Verbal Barriers: (shouting or name calling)

Nonverbal Communication Barriers

1. Flashing or rolling eyes
2. Quick or slow movements
3. Arms crossed, legs crossed
4. Gestures made with exasperation
5. Slouching, hunching over
6. Poor personal care
7. Doodling
8. Staring at people or avoiding eye contact
9. Excessive fidgeting with materials



Each of these barriers block effective communication, mutual understanding, respect, problem solving, and identifying solutions that will meet everyone's needs. They put a serious strain on relationships that need to be collaborative in order to most effectively meet the needs of our children. Use of these "communication errors" increases the emotional distance between the parties, escalates the intensity of the conflict and creates a negative environment for everyone involved. *Is that what you really want to do?????*

Effective Communication . . .

It is two way.

It involves active listening.

It reflects the accountability of speaker & listener.

It utilizes feedback.

It is free of stress.

It is clear.



Communicating with Your Child's School (and Other Agencies)

The keys to your child's success in school are in your hands. These keys include knowing the educators in your child's life, talking with them, and establishing good communication and a friendly relationship with them.

These keys will open many doors. They'll help you to work together and problem solve as a team, to trust and rely on one another, and ensure that your child is supported by services and instruction that will enable her/him to succeed.



There are some specific communication skills that can help you be most successful in developing and maintaining a strong partnership with your child's school. This section was adapted from material developed jointly by CADRE (Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education) and NICHY (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities). We hope these tips will be helpful to all parents as you work with schools and other agencies to insure that your child receives the opportunities and services that will help them thrive.

Getting Started

First, understand that your role as a parent is unique. No one knows and loves your child the way that you do. You are the expert on your child. And, while you may not have all the answers, you want your child to be successful in school and in life. Your passion, as a parent, can help you communicate brilliantly, and sometimes, it can overtake you.

Step 1.

Be mindful of your emotional pressure gauge as you work with your child's school.

If you expect to have difficulty when meeting with school personnel, your mind and body will be primed for battle. How can you communicate successfully if you are on the verge of overflowing in anguish and outrage? Don't let your mind go there. Keep thoughts of past (or present) problems at school, worst fears, and other negatives from creeping into your mind. Focus positively on your goals and the view that the school wants to do their best for your child. Keep telling yourself that you and your child will succeed.



Step 2. Prioritize and Plan.

What's the most important thing that needs to be accomplished for your child? Make a list of the issues, questions, and possible solutions. Rank them. Decide if there are any you can pass on and which one(s) must be addressed. Plan how you are willing to give and take in order to achieve the higher goal. Map out what you need to say and practice, if that helps:

"What's most important for Jordan right now is . . ."

"We really need to focus on . . ."

Referring to these few notes, with key phrases jotted down, can help keep you and the meeting on track.



Step 3.
Actively listen to understand the other person's perspective.



If you don't understand what someone is saying, tell him or her. Be direct:

"I just don't understand what you are saying. Can you explain it in a different way or give me some examples?"

"Is there something you can show me, in writing, so I can fully understand?"

Keep asking and wait for responses until you do fully understand. Resist any temptation to answer your own questions or put words into someone else's mouth.

Step 4. Clarify your statements.



If you see a puzzled expression on someone's face and ask for clarification in return. Paraphrase, or restate so that you and others are clear in your understanding.

To be understood:

"I must not be explaining this clearly, what I'm trying to say is . . ."

"Here's a copy of . . . Let's look at this together. It shows that . . ."

So that you understand:

"It sounds like you're saying . . ."

"If I understand you correctly, you're saying . . . Is that right?"

"Is that written down anywhere so I can read it?"

Often, the process of clarifying understanding provides an opportunity to clear up a misconception or correct misinformation that could be critical to finding a satisfactory solution for your child. So, don't overlook the value of this technique.



Step 5.
Have options in mind and offer them for discussion, as needed.

As a parent, you're in a good position to present alternative solutions that might not occur to those who work for the school system. (Along the lines of the old adage, "Sometimes you just can't see the forest for all the trees."):

"Let's do some brainstorming on possibilities to see what we can come up with.

How about . . .?"

And, if you've done some research, information gathering, or obtained any formal recommendations:

"Here's a recommendation from . . . that has proven successful. We should seriously consider this for Janey."

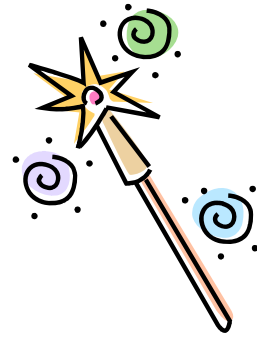
"Let's try this for 8 weeks and see how it goes."

It's also important to make sure that the focus stays on your child and meeting his or her needs. Sometimes, words like the following can help tighten everyone's focus:

"Jordan's dad and I just haven't seen the kind of progress that Jordan needs to make. What other options can we consider for him?"

Step 6. You're only human.

If someone has been particularly helpful, acknowledge their efforts. Sometimes, especially when frustrations rise, acknowledging what has gone well, and how hard everyone has worked, sweetens the air a bit and makes it possible for everyone to feel better and push towards the finish line!



If, by chance, you make a mistake, or cause offense, say you're sorry. Making an apology says that you're only human and helps to humanize what is often a formal process and sends the message that you can be forgiving of others mistakes. "Please and thank you" also go a long way in keeping conversations civil, and not surprisingly, helps everyone say "yes."

In the end, ask for the "yes."

As you communicate and negotiate, you will uncover areas where you and the school are in agreement. You may agree on the issue that must be addressed, but not be in full agreement on how to address it. This is when it can be especially helpful to restate and discuss options in a problem solving way. This means presenting and fully analyzing proposed solutions on their own merits. It also means asking some direct, yet polite, questions such as:

"I'm still puzzled. Why isn't this an option?"

"Jordan needs this. Who has some ideas on how we can make it happen?"

Additionally, words that recognize the desires and the difficulties for schools to meet every child's needs, while refocusing on your child, can lead to a greater willingness to put forth extra effort and think more creatively about ways to say "yes" to and for your child:

"I appreciate the huge responsibility and demands facing our school system. I understand that there's never enough money, nor enough staff to meet all children's needs in the way that we all want. Truly, I do. You are responsible for meeting many children's needs. My number one job is to see to it that my child's needs are met. None of us has an easy job.

"I know that there's a way for us to work this out, together, so that Janey gets the services she needs. How are we going to do this?"

Talking the talk.

So, in a nutshell, when talking with staff and administrators at your child's school, you're likely to be successful if you can:

- Keep your cool.
- Focus on the positives.
- Be clear about your goals.
- Listen. Ask questions. Clarify.
- Keep the focus on meeting your child's needs.
- Present options in a collaborative way; for example, say, "we can" instead of "you should." Say, "yes, and. . ." instead of yes, but. . ."
- Ask for the "yes."





Parents Reaching Out

Your One Stop Resource for a Stronger Family

As a statewide non-profit organization, we connect with parents, caregivers, educators and other professionals to promote healthy, positive and caring experiences for New Mexico families and children. We have served New Mexico families for over twenty five years. Our staff and Family Leadership Action Network volunteers reflect the unique diversity of the communities throughout our state.

Children do not come with instructions on how to deal with the difficult circumstances that many families experience. Parents Reaching Out believes that families' needs go beyond the bounds of formal services. *What we can offer to each other is uniquely ours.*

Our Mission

The mission of Parents Reaching Out is to enhance positive outcomes for families and children in New Mexico through informed decision making, advocacy, education, and resources. Parents Reaching Out provides the networking opportunities for families to connect with and support each other. This mission supports *all families* including those who have children with disabilities, and others who are disenfranchised. Parents Reaching Out achieves this by:

- ♦ Developing family leadership
- ♦ Connecting families to each other
- ♦ Building collaborative partnerships
- ♦ Providing families knowledge and tools to enhance their power

Our Beliefs

- ♦ Families need support where ever they are in their journey.
- ♦ All families care deeply about their children.
- ♦ Families may need tools and support to accomplish their dreams.
- ♦ All families are capable of making informed decisions that are right for their family.
- ♦ Families in the state benefit from our organization having the staff and materials that meet their diversity.
- ♦ Systems that listen carefully to the family perspective improve outcomes for our children.

Parents Reaching Out is the home of:

NM Parent Information and Resource Center (NMPIRC)

NM Parent Training and Information Center (NMPTIC)

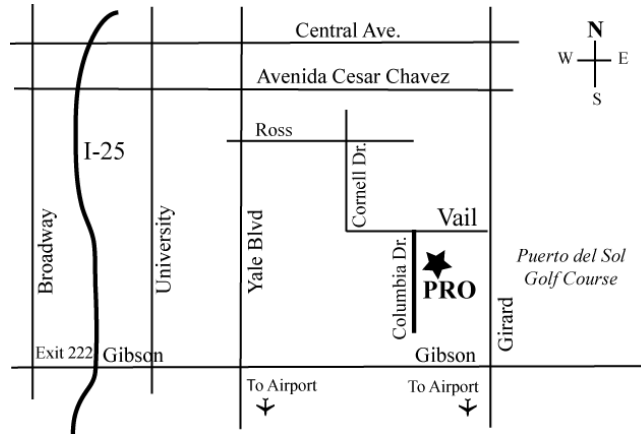
NM Family to Family Health Information Center (NMF2FHIC)

We offer support through parent to parent connections in the areas of early intervention, education, children at risk, special education, health care access, and systems change through:

- ♦ Workshops for families, parents, educators, service providers and other professionals;
- ♦ Encouragement, problem solving and information to help parents make informed decisions;
- ♦ Resource Center with free lending library about the programs and systems families use.

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From I-25—take the Gibson Blvd Exit and go East on Gibson. Turn left at the third stop light (Girard). Turn left on the first street—Vail. Go one block to Columbia. Turn left on Columbia. Go about a half of a block (past brown apartments). Parents Reaching Out is the concrete building on the left. Welcome!

