



# Essential

LIVING SKILLS

## BASIC FAMILY COMMUNICATION



**K-STATE**  
Research and Extension

# Acknowledgments

**Material written and revised by:**

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, professor and extension specialist, family systems, Kansas State University and K-State Research and Extension

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# LEADER'S GUIDE

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Basic Family Communication is designed for families who are seeking to improve everyday communication among family members. This educational program emphasizes skill-building for improving family communication and interaction. It is NOT a replacement for families who need counseling or therapy to deal with their family problems.

The goal of the program is to nurture in family members the capacity to engage in mindful communication with each other. Mindfulness refers to being fully present when communicating with each other and making communication decisions that take into consideration the needs and circumstances of each family member (Smith, 1999).

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## OBJECTIVES

Participants will learn:

- How family communication affects family relations.
- Effective ways to listen to other family members.
- Respectful ways to express themselves.
- The impact of unspoken family rules.
- How to handle difficult issues.
- The benefits of having fun together.

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## PROGRAM DESIGN

The following six basic concepts are used to describe family communication:

- Why Family Communication Is Important
- Take Time to Listen
- How We Say It Makes a Big Difference
- The Impact of Unspoken Rules
- Handling Tough Times
- Having Fun Together

Each communication concept, available on a separate fact sheet, can be copied for persons inquiring about a specific issue. These fact sheets give a brief explanation of the concept followed by examples and skill-building ideas for improving family communication.

When planning a family communication workshop, this leader guide gives a suggested format for a two-hour session that provides an overview of all the information. If you have less time to conduct the workshop or want to focus on particular concepts most suited to a given audience, decide which group activities can be deleted. You may also wish to have a series of workshops, using one activity per session.

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## ROLE OF THE GROUP LEADER

Effective leaders will approach this workshop both as a teacher and a learner. Smith (1999) indicates that a teacher provides quality information, but also learns from the participants. The teacher continually asks: What do the participants know? How have they used this knowledge? What other concepts are they identifying?

Smith (1999) also talks about process versus content: “Program resources provide content. However, the process — the discussion that occurs, the listening and encouragement, responding to questions, laughing and taking chances — is important, too. How the session is organized and how it evolves is an extremely important part of the educational experience. A content-rich program that is lifeless and rigid will not be very successful (p. 19).”

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## TARGET AUDIENCE

The program resources are written for adults and older adolescent youth. The size of a workshop group should be between 6 and 18 participants. A smaller group can evolve into a counseling-type session, which might lead to difficult situations for the group leader. This information is intended for presentation in an educational format only. Having a group with more than 18 participants has a tendency to limit group discussion opportunities.

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## BEFORE STARTING

This workshop will go smoother if you:

- Carefully review this leader’s guide and each of the fact sheets.
- Decide which of the activities and fact sheets you will use.
- Prepare yourself for each activity by thinking about participant reactions and your responses.
- Make copies of the selected fact sheets and evaluation forms for each participant.
- Assemble supplies, if needed.

## WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

The workshop format is built upon the Experiential Learning Model (McFarland, et al., 1999). The steps modified for this workshop are:

1. Start with an introductory warm-up activity.
2. Have the group set ground rules.
3. Explain a concept in your own words, using information on the fact sheets.
4. Introduce an activity for the participants to experience.
5. Share reactions and observations, reflecting on what happened.
6. Generalize to discover what was learned and how it connects to real life.
7. Suggest to participants to apply what was learned in the family setting.

*Repeat steps 3 to 7 for each workshop activity.*

Comments/Notes

## WARM UP

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Suggested warm-up (approximately 10 minutes)

**Purpose:** To help participants feel comfortable in the workshop.

**Supplies:** Paper and markers

Ask participants to draw stick figures of their family. Then ask them to introduce themselves to the group and briefly describe who is in their drawing. Complete this activity by asking what they hope to learn during the workshop to address family communication concerns.

Give a quick overview of the program's key communication concepts. Help the participants understand that today's goal is to put into action what we know and understand about family communication. The workshop is to reinforce skills that keep communication open and respectful, and builds family relationships.

Establishing ground rules (approximately 5 minutes)

**Purpose:** To determine group expectations regarding behaviors that foster comfortable and positive social interaction within the group.

**Supplies:** Flip chart or white board and marker

You might want to have several ground rules listed. Examples are: one person talks at a time, no put-downs, voluntary participation, confidentiality, etc. Ask the group to suggest other ground rules. Ask the group if everyone agrees with each of the rules. If someone voices an objection to a rule, have that person explain why, paraphrase the message, and ask group approval for deleting it. Post the ground rules so they are visible throughout the workshop.

## ACTIVITY 1

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*(approximately 20 minutes)*

**Purpose:** To understand how communication is the key to building family relationships.

**Supplies:** Flip chart or white board and marker

Use your own words to explain Why Family Communication Is Important fact sheet. Emphasize that communication is the key to building or hindering relationships among family members. Use your own family picture from the warm-up activity to illustrate how many family relations exist within any family unit. For example, if there are four persons in your family, there are six one-on-one relations. Each relationship has its own communication pattern. Help the group to recognize that these relationships and communication patterns become more complicated with stepparents, grandparents, and other family members who are important to the family unit.

Ask the group to think about a specific time when they were satisfied with their family communication. It could be a specific incident or a longer period of time. Ask them to think how each person communicated with others, how persons reacted to each other, and what were specific actions, gestures, and verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Divide the group into smaller groups of five to six people. Spend time having the participants react to their memories, sharing their thoughts and feelings. Bring the larger group back together and help them process the experience. Ask them to share a few memories that they found interesting.

### **Follow-up questions:**

What did you learn from these stories?

What did you learn about family communication?

What are some themes running through this discussion? (Post responses from this question on the flip chart or white board.)

### **Points to emphasize:**

There are similarities and differences in how families communicate. Family communication takes place in neighborhoods and within social, cultural, economic and historical contexts. A family member communicates differently with individual family members. Family communication involves hard work. Participants know a lot about family communication.



## ACTIVITY 2

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*(approximately 30 minutes)*

*Note: This activity is divided into two parts.*

**Purpose:** To practice effective listening skills using appropriate nonverbal and verbal feedback skills.

### **Part 1.**

Use your own words to explain the Take Time to Listen fact sheet. Ask the group to stand up and walk around without acknowledging or smiling at each other as they meet. Next, tell them to continue walking and look and smile or whatever they want. Ask them how it felt to not acknowledge each other. Ask them to pair off and get 6 feet apart and try to talk. Ask them to get nose-to-nose. Then tell them to get comfortable. What is the generalization from this experience? Nonverbals are powerful communication skills. Talk about facial expression, body postures and actions, body space boundaries, and appropriate eye contact and how they are important in knowing if someone is listening. The term “appropriate eye contact” is used since some cultures consider eye contact with elders and authority figures as disrespectful.

Ask pairs to sit facing each other. Decide which one will be the speaker and the listener. Ask the listener to use active listening skills until you clap your hands. At that time, the listener is to look away, yawn, lean back, and pay no attention. Have the speaker talk about something that happened last weekend. Have them reverse roles.

### **Follow-up questions:**

How did the speaker feel when the listener looked away? How did the listener feel when looking away?

Why do you think you had these feelings?

What would you like most from someone who is listening to you?

### **Part 2.**

Indicate that we now will be working on verbal feedback while listening. Explain that ineffective communication occurs when the listener interprets the message differently than the speaker intended. The listener can paraphrase back to the speaker, not the exact words, but what the listener interpreted the message to be. This skill is more effective when the listener tries to identify the feelings the speaker has about the issue. Ask the group to return to their partners. The speaker is to talk about something that has changed in his/her life during the past year. The listener is to paraphrase, including his or her perception of the speaker’s feelings. The speaker is to indicate whether or not the listener has interpreted the message correctly. If not, the listener is to paraphrase again until the speaker is satisfied. Reverse roles.

## ACTIVITY 2, CONTINUED

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### **Follow-up questions:**

How did it feel to be paraphrased?

How did it feel to do the paraphrasing?

How does clear feedback in conversation promote effective family communication?

When and where would paraphrasing be useful in your family?

### **Points to emphasize:**

Family members feel valued when they know others really are listening to them. Nonverbal behaviors are powerful. Failures in communication happen when the message is interpreted incorrectly. Listener does not have to agree with the speaker, but must refrain from interrupting or denying the speaker's feelings. Paraphrasing is not needed for every communication interchange between family members, but these listening skills help to slow down a conflict because each person gets a turn to voice an opinion with the listener paraphrasing for the correct message.

*\*Activities and questions adapted from: McFarland, M., et al. (1999). Moving Ahead: Preparing the Youth Development Professional.*

## ACTIVITY 3

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*(approximately 15 minutes)*

*Note: This activity is divided into two parts.*

**Purpose:** To practice using speaking skills to strengthen family relationships.

**Supplies:** Flip chart or white board and marker

### **Part 1.**

Use your own words to explain How We Say It Makes A Big Difference fact sheet. Ask for participant reactions to the following two messages:

- You NEVER pay attention to me at home. YOU come in the house after work and go straight to the TV. YOU seem to care more about what is happening in the world than what is happening to me. YOU really make me feel lousy.
- I feel like we are not paying attention to each other when we both get home. I wonder if you are more concerned about catching up on the news than the two of us sharing what has happened to each of us during the day. When this happens, I get frustrated because I think we are not connecting very well.

### **Follow-up questions:**

How did you feel when the first message was read? Did you feel differently with the second message? What was the difference in the feelings?

What was the difference in the words?

### **Points to emphasize:**

“YOU” messages escalate conflict because the other person feels put down, blamed, accused, or guilty. The immediate reaction is to become defensive or to shut down and not communicate at all. Persons who use “I” messages are taking responsibility for their feelings and behavior. They express the impact of the other person’s behavior in a way that is not offensive to the other person.

### **Part 2.**

**On a flip chart or white board, write:**

**“I” message has 3 parts:**

**“When....”** (state the unacceptable behavior)

**“I feel...”** (express feeling about the behavior) **“Because...”** (describe the effect of the behavior)

## ACTIVITY 3, CONTINUED

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Have the pairs take turns and practice sending “I” messages using the following scenarios:

1. Joe and Leisha have not been getting along lately. She thinks he hangs out too much with friends at the local bowling alley.
2. April is raising her 13-year-old son by herself. He argues with his mother whenever she asks him to wash the dishes. April is getting frustrated.

### Follow-up questions:

How did this activity feel?

Do “I” messages seem artificial?

What issues emerged that you did not expect?

How do “I” messages promote effective family communication?

Can you think of situations where “I” messages could reduce conflict in your family?

### Points to emphasize:

“I” messages give you a way to share what is on your mind without blaming or judging other family members. Talking in this manner can often surprise family members, especially if “YOU” messages have been the usual way to communicate. They may be astounded to learn how you really feel. “I” statements help to reduce conflict that can spiral out of control. “I” messages also can be used to share positive emotions and events that other family members might not know otherwise. They can be used to express feelings of appreciation to others. Example: “When you make the doctor appointments, I feel relieved because it gives me more time to pay the bills.”

*\*Activities and questions adapted from: McFarland, M., et al. (1999). Moving Ahead: Preparing the Youth Development Professional.*

## ACTIVITY 4

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*(approximately 20 minutes)*

*Note: This activity is divided into three parts.*

**Purpose:** To reinforce skills that keep communication open and demonstrate respect for having differences.

**Supplies:** Flip chart or white board and marker; paper and pencil for each participant

This activity covers both The Impact of Unspoken Rules and Handling Tough Times fact sheets. Share the information in your own words. Tie the two fact sheets together by saying that unspoken rules are important in helping family members know what to expect. When unspoken rules cause conflict, speaking and listening skills as well as problem-solving skills will help families resolve these differences.

### **Part 1.**

Have small groups name unspoken rules that might guide family communication. Examples: No one talks about Grandma's first marriage, Mom makes the decisions about child care, etc.

### **Follow-up questions:**

How are unspoken rules helpful for family communication? When are they unhelpful?

How do unspoken rules that cause conflict relate to the problem-solving process?

### **Points to emphasize:**

Unspoken rules help each family member know what to expect in day-to-day interactions. Unspoken rules exist in all families. Some rules need changing as a family grows and develops. For instance, bedtimes are apt to change as children get older. If there is resistance to changing a rule, the problem solving process can help a family bring the rule out in the open. The process helps family members define and verbalize exactly what the rule is, how it affects different family members, and possibilities for changing the rule. Listening and speaking skills also are needed while going through the problem-solving steps.

### **Part 2.**

Indicate to participants that we are now going to focus on Handling Tough Times. Ask participants to write down three ways their bodies react to strong negative emotions. Then ask them to list three ways they calm themselves. For example, take deep breaths, try muscle relaxation, take time-outs, etc.

## ACTIVITY 4, CONTINUED

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### Follow-up questions:

How did this activity feel?

How could calming down contribute to effective family communication?

What additional ideas did you get from others on how to calm down?

### Points to emphasize:

Strong emotions can shut down thinking. Getting in control of your feelings allows you to confront troublesome issues in your family with responsible decision making and problem solving. It decreases the possibility of personal attacks and other disrespectful behavior that you would regret later. It takes about 20 minutes for the body to return to normal after experiencing extreme emotions.

### Part 3.

Write on the flip chart or white board the problem-solving process: stop; look and listen; think; and act. Emphasize breaking big problems into parts. “Look and listen” is for clearly defining the problem, often the hardest part. Emphasize breaking big problems into parts to go through the process. Review the problem-solving steps and have small groups discuss a simulated family situation in which the problem-solving process could be used. The following scenario can be used if you wish.

*Ben and Tanika live from paycheck to paycheck. Ben comes home one day, announcing that he has rented a cheaper apartment even though the children will have to change schools. He is pleased with himself. However, much to his surprise, Tanika is furious.*

What is the actual problem?

What are some solutions and the pros and cons of each?

What solution would you choose?

### Follow-up questions:

Which parts of the problem-solving process were the most helpful? Were there surprises in clearly defining the problem?

How can the problem-solving process contribute to effective family communication?

How do you plan to use the problem-solving process in your family?

### Points to emphasize:

The problem-solving process is used in connection with listening and speaking skills to keep the process on track. Clearly defining the problem can often be the hardest part. Thinking about solutions before the problem is clearly defined will hinder the problem-solving process. Time-outs are useful if a person's emotions begin to feel out of control while trying to problem-solve. The key to time-outs is setting a specific time and place to resume the process as well as not thinking negatively about the person(s) who are involved in the conflict.

## ACTIVITY 5

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*(approximately 10 minutes)*

**Purpose:** To identify intentional ways in which families can have fun.

**Supplies:** 3"x 5" note cards, pencils, paper bag

Use your own words to explain the Having Fun Together fact sheet. Have each participant write one enjoyable family activity on a note card. All cards are dropped in a paper bag. Ask each participant to draw a card and read it. If the group interacts comfortably, ask them to guess who wrote the activity. If incorrect, have the person who wrote the activity identify self.

**Follow-up questions:**

How did this activity make you feel?

How can fun activities contribute to family communication?

What are your plans to reinforce enjoyment within your family?

**Points to emphasize:**

Pleasant interactions build relationships and create powerful memories. Busy families can find simple ways to have fun in their everyday lives. Set ground rules to protect planned activities from turning into conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

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*(approximately 10 minutes)*

To encourage reflections at end of the workshop, group discussion can be initiated by the following questions:

- What “ah-hah’s” have you experienced during the workshop?
- What skills were you glad to practice?
- What is something that you already knew and were pleased to have reinforced?
- At what point did you say to yourself such things as:
  - Yes, that is right on.
  - How can that be?
  - That won’t work for my family.
  - I can see the point, but there are some issues that really get in the way for me.
- What ideas apply to your family?
- What will you try with your family?
- What other communication skills could your family use?

*\*Questions from: McFarland, M., et al. (1999). Moving Ahead: Preparing the Youth Development Professional.*

**Remind participants to complete the evaluation sheets.**



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## Comments/Notes

# EVALUATION

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**Evaluation instruments are included to measure progress toward the following objectives:**

- A. Participants will become aware of their family's need for basic communication skills.
- B. Participants will determine which basic family communication skills they want to acquire or improve and develop and implement a plan to achieve these skills.
- C. Participants will increase their competencies in family communication skills.
- D. Participants will report improvement in their family communication skills and activities.

Participants may write NA in any blank if it is not applicable to their situation.

Participants should return completed evaluations to their local extension agent or program facilitator.

# BASIC FAMILY COMMUNICATION EVALUATION

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— Instrument to be administered before classes —

**Please answer the following questions. Your name will not be attached to this piece of paper or to your answers. Confidentiality will be respected at all times.**

## **Measurable Objective A: “Evaluating My Need to Know More About Family Communication”**

*Please use a ✓ or ✗ or fill in the best answer for each line.*

	1	2	3	4	5
How important is it for me to know more about ...	Not Important At All	Not Important	Maybe	Important	Very Important
Why family communication is important					
Active listening skills					
Effective speaking techniques					
The impact of unspoken rules					
Handling tough times					
Having fun with the family					

# EVALUATION: WHY FAMILY COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT

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— Instrument to be administered before classes —

## Measurable Objective B: “My Plan for Improving My Skills”

1. During the next six months, I would like to improve my understanding of *family communication*.

- Yes       No

2. My goals for improvement in the area of family communication: *(please check all that apply)*

- To learn how communication affects family life.  
 To learn about the many parts of family communication.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

3. Date I plan to achieve these goals: \_\_\_\_\_

4. My plan for achieving these goals includes:

- Attending classes or workshops.  
 Reading publications.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

5. My plan for putting these communication goals into action includes:

- Being more positive and respectful when I communicate with my family.  
 Talking to myself about the good qualities of each family member.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

# EVALUATION: TAKE TIME TO LISTEN

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— *Instrument to be administered before classes* —

## Measurable Objective B: “My Plan for Improving My Skills”

1. During the next six months, I would like to improve my *listening* skills.

- Yes       No

2. My goals for improvement in listening: *(please check all that apply)*

- To know the difference between hearing and listening.  
 To use nonverbal behaviors that build trust.  
 To respond in a way that shows I understand the other person correctly.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

3. Date I plan to achieve these goals: \_\_\_\_\_

4. My plan for achieving these goals includes:

- Attending classes or workshops.  
 Reading publications.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

5. My plan for putting these goals into action includes:

- Using nonverbal behavior to show respect to the speaker.  
 Checking with the speaker to see if I heard the message correctly.  
 Using active listening skills even when I do not agree with the message.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

# EVALUATION: HOW WE SAY IT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE

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— *Instrument to be administered before classes* —

## Measurable Objective B: “My Plan for Improving My Skills”

1. During the next six months, I would like to improve my skills in *talking* to other family members.

- Yes       No

2. My goals for improvement in talking to other family members are: (*please check all that apply*)

- To share my thoughts and feelings in a way that will not anger other family members.  
 To use “I” messages.  
 Other (*please write in*) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Date I plan to achieve these goals: \_\_\_\_\_

4. My plan for achieving these goals includes:

- Attending classes or workshops.  
 Reading publications.  
 Other (*please write in*) \_\_\_\_\_

5. My plan for putting these goals into action includes:

- Using “I” statements to share my thoughts and feelings.  
 Avoiding the use of “you” statements that blame or criticize.  
 Other (*please write in*) \_\_\_\_\_

# EVALUATION: THE IMPACT OF UNSPOKEN RULES

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— *Instrument to be administered before classes* —

## Measurable Objective B: “My Plan for Improving My Skills”

1. During the next six months, I would like to improve my skills in recognizing *unspoken family rules*.

Yes       No

2. My goals for improvement in the area of unspoken family rules are: (*please check all that apply*)

To recognize unspoken family rules.

To become aware of how unspoken family rules affect family communication.

Other (*please write in*) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Date I plan to achieve these goals: \_\_\_\_\_

4. My plan for achieving these goals includes:

Attending classes or workshops.

Reading publications.

Other (*please write in*) \_\_\_\_\_

5. My plan for putting these goals into action includes:

Identifying unspoken family rules.

Working at changing unspoken rules that no longer fit our family.

Other (*please write in*) \_\_\_\_\_

# EVALUATION: HANDLING TOUGH TIMES

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— *Instrument to be administered before classes* —

## Measurable Objective B: “My Plan for Improving My Skills”

1. During the next six months, I would like to improve my skills in *handling tough times* in our family.

- Yes       No

2. My goals for improvement in handling tough times are: *(please check all that apply)*

- To use a problem-solving process.  
 To show care and concern toward other family members.  
 To break big problems into parts to deal with situation.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

3. Date I plan to achieve these goals: \_\_\_\_\_

4. My plan for achieving these goals includes:

- Attending classes and workshops.  
 Reading publications.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

5. My plan for putting these goals into action includes:

- Breaking problems into smaller parts.  
 Using problem-solving steps.  
 Doing small things that show care and concern for other family members.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_



# EVALUATION: HAVING FUN TOGETHER

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— Instrument to be administered before classes —

## Measurable Objective B: “My Plan for Improving My Skills”

1. During the next six months, I would like to improve my skills in helping our family have *fun*.

- Yes       No

2. My goals for improvement in the area of having fun together are: *(please check all that apply)*

- To use fun times to build family relationships.  
 To identify everyday situations to have fun together.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

3. Date I plan to achieve these goals: \_\_\_\_\_

4. My plan for achieving these goals includes:

- Attending classes or workshops.  
 Reading publications.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

5. My plan for putting these goals into action includes:

- Planning family activities to have fun together.  
 Protecting planned activities from conflict.  
 Using daily conversation to share pleasant things.  
 Other *(please write in)* \_\_\_\_\_

# BASIC FAMILY COMMUNICATION EVALUATION

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— Instrument to be administered following classes —

**Please answer the following questions. Your name will not be attached to this piece of paper or to your answers. Confidentiality will be respected at all times.**

## Measurable Objectives C: “Evaluating My Progress Toward Meeting My Goals”

*Please use a ✓ or ✗ or fill in the best answer for each line.*

	1	2	3	4	5
Progress I have made toward accomplishing my goals in these areas ...	None	A Little Progress	Some Progress	Much Progress	Met My Goals
The importance of family communication					
Active listening skills					
Effective speaking techniques					
Impact of unspoken rules					
Handling tough times					
Having fun with the family					

# BASIC FAMILY COMMUNICATION EVALUATION

— Instrument to be administered before classes, following classes, and at 6- and 12-month follow-ups —

**Please answer the following questions. Your name will not be attached to this piece of paper or to your answers. Confidentiality will be respected at all times.**

## Measurable Objective D: “An Assessment of How My Family Communication Skills Affect My Family’s Life Together”

Please use a ✓ or ✗ or fill in the best answer for each line.

	1	2	3	4	5
How often do you ...	Never	Sometimes	About Half of the Time	Often	Always
<b>Think about family communication</b>					
Communicate in a positive and respectful way					
Talk to myself about good qualities of each family member					
<b>Take time to listen</b>					
Use nonverbal behaviors that show respect					
Check with speaker for correct message					
Use active listening skills even when disagreeing					
<b>Recognize how we say it makes a big difference</b>					
Use “I” statements to share thoughts and feelings					
Avoid using “you” statements to blame or criticize					
<b>Think about impact of unspoken rules</b>					
Recognize how unspoken family rules affect family relationships					
Work at changing unspoken rules that no longer fit our family					
<b>Use communication skills to handle tough times</b>					
Break problems into smaller parts					
Use problem-solving steps					
Show care and concern to other family members					
<b>Have fun together with your family</b>					
Work at planning family activities to have fun together					
Protect planned activities from conflict					
Use daily conversation to share pleasant things					

## WHY FAMILY COMMUNICATION IS IMPORTANT

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We rarely think about our communication with loved ones. But, family communication is very important and determines our relationships with each other, setting the tone for family life.

Family communication is **not** simple. It has many parts. Communication is more than what we say and do. Our messages depend on how we think the other person will react, so we communicate differently with individual members of the family. Each of us has several different communication patterns that develop over time. It depends on who is communicating.

### HOW WE COMMUNICATE

We have something we want to share when we communicate with another family member. Using words is the most common way to express our thoughts and feelings. We also send nonverbal messages with our eyes, facial expressions, and body movements. Have you ever known anyone in your family to stomp out of the room without saying a word? That is a nonverbal message. Objects can be used to send a message. Giving a birthday gift relays a message of appreciation and love. Electronic messages are also common methods for communicating with each other; however, these lessons focus on face-to-face communication.

### LISTENING

Another important part of communication is listening. A good listener sends a nonverbal message of care and concern even if he or she does not agree with the message being sent. Thoughtful listening builds relationships.

Conflicts happen when family members do not agree with each other. That is normal because no two people are likely to get along all the time. It takes time and effective communication skills to work through these differences. Treating each other with respect even when we are mad at each other is very important. That means no name calling or insulting. How we treat each other in conflict shows how much we value our relationship. There are many communication skills that can be learned to help families get along with each other.

### COMMUNICATION EXAMPLES

#### **A word with two meanings:**

When Enrique and Sue were first married, Enrique said he wanted to have a large family. Sue thought he meant three children, and Enrique meant at least six. They each had a different meaning for the word “large.” Enrique and Sue avoided an argument by taking the time to listen to each other. It helped them to understand that they were using the same word to mean two different things.

### **A difficult situation:**

Brittnay and Chris both have children from previous marriages. They always have problems around the winter holidays working out visitation schedules with other family members. Brittnay wants to start discussing it early. She brings up the topic, but Chris is not in the mood to talk about it. He gets up and walks out of the room. She follows him and continues to talk about the issue. The more he refuses to talk, the more she pursues the topic. Finally they both explode. Later they regret what they said to each other. To protect their relationship, they have work to do in learning new ways to communicate.

## (1) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Think about typical interactions among your family members, including grandparents and other relatives. Review both the happy times and the problem times. It helps to think how we can increase the happy times, and change the times we clash with each other. It is easy to think that another family member should change. We should look seriously at ourselves first to see what type of communication patterns we are using. We have the most control over ourselves in changing family interactions.

## (2) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

We can get carried away by thinking bad things about others when there is a lot of conflict. Stop yourself when negative feelings and thoughts overwhelm positive ones about other family members. Talk to yourself about the good qualities of other family members. Think about the good times you have had together. Self-talk is powerful for influencing our feelings and actions.

## TAKE TIME TO LISTEN

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Communication with family members involves talking, but listening is very important. Effective listening is one of the best ways to show that we care for the other person. Effective listening builds trust, but takes patience and hard work.

Listening is more than hearing. “Hearing” is the process of sending sound waves to the brain. “Listening” is understanding what is actually said. A family member can tell when we are listening by noticing our eyes, facial expressions, and body movements. Part of listening may be as simple as saying, “Yes,” or “I see,” or nodding our head. Think about other body language. What message are we sending? Are we fidgeting? Rolling our eyes? Smiling sarcastically? Think about our body position. Are we facing the speaker without being too close or too far away? Are we sending a message that we are truly listening?

Effective listening does not mean that we agree. We may not like what the other person is saying. We are just trying to understand and identify with the other person’s message. We may need to ask questions to get the correct meaning. Sometimes family members want a listening ear without advice or judgment.

One way to show we understand is to use our own words to repeat the main points that the other person has communicated to us. This is called paraphrasing. If you are not sure, you could say, “I don’t understand what you said. Will you try again?” It is helpful to try to identify the speaker’s feelings when paraphrasing, too. If we are not correct in understanding the speaker’s emotions and message, we need to repeat the process until the other person is satisfied that we understand. Effective communication happens when each person gets a turn to be listened to without interruption.

### COMMUNICATION EXAMPLES

#### **The apology:**

Lacy is in the sixth grade and is upset with her mother, Joan, because she did not have a signed parent permission slip to take a field trip. Joan does not interrupt while Lacy is talking. She patiently listens. When Lacy stops, her mother does not get defensive. Joan uses her own words to see if she understands Lacy’s message. She starts out with “I can see you are really mad because I did not get the form signed.” Rather than giving excuses, Joan apologizes to Lacy for failing to sign the form.

#### **A listening ear:**

Kelly, an African American teenager, is angry when he is asked in his high school class to give the African American viewpoint on the Civil War. He thinks it is unfair to ask one person to speak for an entire group of people. His father quietly listens to Kelly as he vents his anger and asks questions to make sure he understands what Kelly is saying and feeling.

## (1) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Ask another family member to practice nonverbal listening skills with you. Sit facing each other and decide which person will be the speaker and which one the listener. Talk about something you did last weekend. The listener is to use facial expressions, body postures, and appropriate eye contact to show effective listening skills. After one minute, the listener is to look away, yawn, lean back, and pay no attention to the speaker. Reverse roles. Stop and talk about both of your reactions to the changes in the listener's behavior. Talk with each other about what you like most when you want a family member to listen.

## (2) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Have the speaker hold a ball, key, or some other object. This is a reminder that the speaker is not to be interrupted or to be challenged in sending a message. The speaker is to describe one good thing that has happened in the past year. When the speaker is finished, the listener is to paraphrase what the speaker said. Try to identify the speaker's feelings as you paraphrase. Example: "You seem really excited about getting a good grade in English because it helps you to write papers in other classes." Ask the speaker if you have the message correct. If not, paraphrase until the speaker is satisfied. Switch roles by exchanging the object. The next step is to repeat this exercise with each speaker talking about a minor problem between the two of you. Paraphrasing is easier if the speaker gives a short message rather than a long one. It is likely to be more difficult for the listener to not interrupt and voice an opinion when the message is about a problem. Use the object to remember who is the speaker and who is the listener. By switching roles, each person has the chance to be understood by the other. Discuss how it felt to do the paraphrasing or to have your message paraphrased.

## HOW WE SAY IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

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We can say the same words to two different people, but how we say it can change the meaning of our message. We often talk differently to individual family members and to friends.

What makes the difference in our messages? Our tone of voice is part of our communication. The timing of a message is another important factor in family communication. It takes courtesy and attention to the other person's situation to know when it is best to communicate. Body language is important, too. Our face sends messages when we are talking. If we frown or roll our eyes, it will mean something different than if a pleasant smile is on our face. A clenched fist may indicate anger. Leaning slightly forward when someone is talking may indicate caring and listening.

Family members may think that they know each other so well that there is no need to share feelings and thoughts with each other. This may not be true. We may feel completely different from what others think. It can be helpful at times to use “I” messages to share either positive or negative emotions. A good standard way for sending “I” messages is: **“When . . . I feel . . . because . . .”**

### FOR EXAMPLE:

**“When you make the doctor appointments, I feel relieved because it gives me more time to pay our bills.”**

Most of the time when we disagree with someone, we send a “you” message. We may forget to talk in a respectful way, especially if we are mad. “You” messages are usually understood as put-downs by other family members. Put-downs invite more put-downs. When we feel blamed, accused or attacked with “you” statements, we usually do two things: 1) defend ourselves and counterattack; or 2) refuse to communicate.

“I” statements that state your feelings help during moments of tension. The other person is less likely to feel attacked when you say how you feel. “I” messages show that you are taking responsibility for your feelings.

### COMMUNICATION EXAMPLE

#### An “I” message at the right time:

Angie knows that her family needs to talk about spending less money. Although she would like to discuss it now, she sees Russell is watching his favorite TV show. She decides to wait until the show is over to bring up the subject of money. After the show is over, she says to him in a respectful way, “When our bills get so big, I feel really frustrated because it means we cannot go see our families on holidays. Can we talk about it now?” She does not get mad or blame him for the credit card problem.



## (1) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Think about the example: “You are always late for dinner.” How would you respond to “you” messages like this one? Most generally, people defend themselves or refuse to communicate. It also depends on the tone of voice and nonverbals that were used to send the message. Practice at changing “You are always late for dinner,” into an “I” message. Use this guide: **“When . . . I feel . . . because . . .”**

## (2) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Now think about a “you” message that you have given to another family member. How did you say it? What were your nonverbal clues? Practice changing the message into an “I” statement that does not cause the other person to get defensive.

## (3) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

To practice using “I” statements, choose any subject that interests you and tell a family member about it for a few minutes. Examples might include: a favorite TV show or movie; current event; or a fun activity. After listening to the information, give the other person a chance to tell you what was heard. Let this person know whether the message you sent was received as you intended. Have your family member paraphrase until you are satisfied that the information is correct. Switch roles and let the other person talk. Repeat the same procedure, but choose a topic that causes minor conflict between the two of you. Be willing to practice this activity several times.

## THE IMPACT OF UNSPOKEN RULES

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Parents may teach children specific rules like saying “please” or “thank you.” Other communication rules may never be discussed, but determine how family members behave toward each other. What can be discussed, how it can be discussed, and who can discuss it are part of unspoken family rules. Families develop these patterns of communicating with each other over time, sometimes without even thinking about it. They help everyone know what to expect from each other. Certain family communication rules can be helpful and satisfying to everyone in the family, other rules can be upsetting to some members. Rules may need to change over time as a family grows and develops.

### COMMUNICATION EXAMPLES

#### **Making a change:**

When Tish and Mark go out with friends one evening, Mark automatically answers questions that are directed to Tish. He does not realize that he does this until one of his friends says, “Let Tish talk!” This comment helps him recognize the communication pattern that he has established. He works hard the rest of the evening not to interrupt Tish or to speak for her.

#### **A breakthrough:**

Aloyce is very bitter about her divorce from Tim. She ignores or yells at the children whenever his name comes up. When one of the children started crying after Tim’s name was mentioned, Aloyce realizes that she has created an unspoken family rule — no one is to talk about Tim. She can see how it is affecting the children. The children’s reactions help her remember that she lost a husband, but Tim will always be their father. She knows that the children should not fear her anger when they talk about their father.

#### **Time to talk about an unspoken rule:**

Jared makes all the big financial decisions in the family without asking his wife, Caley. One day he announces that the family will move to a different apartment where the rent is lower. The move will require the children to change schools. Caley storms out of the room and locks herself in the bedroom. The unspoken rules about family financial decision making are causing conflict. Jared and Caley need to use effective communication skills to talk about this issue. If they do not, it is likely to become a bigger problem that might harm their relationship.

## BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The purpose of this activity is to increase your awareness of the rules that operate in your family. You will learn to recognize the difference between rules that can be openly mentioned and those that are to remain unspoken. Examples of family rules: Grandma's first marriage is not to be mentioned. Mom makes all the child care decisions.

This activity may take more than one time to complete. Have family members individually make a list of communication rules that operate in the family. Compare the lists and sit down to discuss the following questions. Even if family members do not agree, each person should be given a chance to talk without interruption. This is an opportunity to use effective listening and speaking skills. The questions are:

1. Which rules are helpful? Which ones are not?
2. What is our family trying to accomplish with these rules?
3. Which rules are direct and clear? Which rules are unspoken?
4. How are rules made?
5. Which rules need to be changed or discarded?
6. How does our family go about changing a rule?

## HANDLING TOUGH TIMES

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Communication built on trust helps family members survive all kinds of tough times. You know you can depend on each other. Having trust also means the communication patterns you use all the time show care and respect for each other. You may not always agree, but each of you has confidence that everyone will talk with respect, even when angry. Family members stop themselves from using insults and name calling to hurt each other.

Big problems can seem overwhelming at times. They are easier to deal with when you break them down into parts. It takes work to know where to start. Get your emotions under control first. Effective communication is hard when a person is angry. Stop and clearly define one part of the problem. This is often the hardest part of problem solving. If you are angry at a family member, define one specific behavior without exaggerating your feelings or bringing up the past. If the problem is beyond the family's control, such as a parent losing employment, identify one part of the problem at a time. It may be getting transportation to find a new job. After you have clearly defined one part of the problem, brainstorm creative solutions. Try hard to welcome all suggestions. If you begin to say, "No, that won't work," other family members will stop thinking creatively. Think about the pros and cons for each solution and then decide on one. The next step is to do what you have decided. The final step is to see if it is working. If it is not, start the problem-solving process again.

Problem solving is more successful when family members already have effective ways to interact with each other. This includes good listening and speaking skills. See other fact sheets in this series to learn more about these communication skills.

### COMMUNICATION EXAMPLES

#### **Care for self:**

Alexis is raising her two grandchildren. She is overwhelmed. She does not know what to do. Someone suggests a book at the library on grandparents raising grandchildren. The book helps her realize that one part of the problem is taking care of herself. She takes one small step by deciding to get up 15 minutes early each morning to have some private time. She is amazed at how much energy this gives her to tackle the everyday problems.

#### **Time out:**

Don is furious that Silvia has used their credit card. When he brings up the issue, his voice begins to rise and neither one is working hard at listening and understanding the other. He can feel himself getting angrier and angrier. He asks Silvia to take a time out so that he can cool down. They decide to talk after he has taken a bicycle ride. Don knows that during this time, he needs to think positive things about his partner, rather than concentrating on how mad he is. When he returns, they jump to thinking about solutions before they clearly define the problem. Later they realize that the problem is not just about using the credit card, but about late child

support payments from the children's father. They create a new list of solutions to deal with a more clearly defined problem.

**No job:**

Trenton loses his job. His wife shows her concern with quiet acts of tenderness. She reaches out to hold his hand while they watch TV. Small gestures are important for building trust and showing care and concern.

## (1) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Examine one problem in your family. Go through the following problem-solving steps:

**STOP:** Recognize the problem. Control your emotions so that you can talk about it.

**LOOK AND LISTEN:** Clearly define the problem. You may find that a large problem needs to be broken into parts.

**THINK:** Brainstorm all possible solutions — focus on being both creative and non-judgmental. When the brainstorming is finished, discuss the pros and cons of all of the solutions and describe how you feel about each one.

**ACT:** Agree on a solution — it may take compromise with other family members. Implement your solution. Check back at a later time with other family members to see if the solution is working. Start over if it is not.

## (2) BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Have family members write down or talk about five actions that they would like each family member to do — especially during tough times. For instance, a sister may write that she likes her brother to cheer her up and ask about her school work. Share your list with each family member and think about the following:

- Were there any actions on your family's lists that surprised you?
- Did any actions on your lists surprise other family members?

## HAVING FUN TOGETHER

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Families who enjoy each other build strong family relationships. Families find it hard to have fun and enjoy each other when they are fighting all the time. Time spent playing together provides a relaxed way for family members to bond with each other. This helps to reduce arguments. When family members are having fun, they are more calm and more themselves. Having fun can be especially helpful for families who are struggling financially, or are suffering other severe stresses. Family ties are strengthened when they find ways to enjoy each other. Good times build powerful memories.

We often think we cannot stop and make time for fun with our busy lives. Fun can come in simple and everyday ways. Daily conversation provides an easy way to increase family fun. Try giving compliments and talking over pleasant things that happened during the day. Playful silliness can be nourishing, too. Doing helpful things for others also can be fun. For example, one family rakes leaves for their elderly neighbor each fall.

A family may have to establish some ground rules when they are planning a fun event. This will help to avoid arguments that can ruin a family's attempt to have fun.

### COMMUNICATION EXAMPLES

#### **Planning a “date”**

Reo and Tenika decide that they need to have a “date” once a month to have fun without the children. To save money, they trade baby-sitting with their neighbors. After arriving at the matinee for their “date,” Reo gets in line to buy popcorn and drinks. This makes Tenika furious since she thinks they already have spent enough money on tickets. Their fun is ruined because they did not protect their “date” from conflict. Since money is an issue, they could have talked with each other before they went out to decide how much they would spend, and what they would buy.

#### **Using the moment**

Alicia takes the hand of her 10-year-old when a lively song comes on the radio. They laugh and have a good time dancing to the music.

#### **Friday night**

Seth and his two young daughters are together on weekends since Seth's divorce from the girls' mother. He finds the first few weekends difficult. Then he decides to try something new. They go to the library on Friday evenings, taking turns to check out a movie. They spread a blanket on the floor, eat pizza, and watch the movie. After the movie is over, they take turns talking about the movie. It becomes a regular activity.

### **The game**

Angela, age 11, gets upset easily. After her dad listens to her problem, he sometimes asks her to choose a board game for the two of them to play. This helps Angela calm down at the same time that it strengthens their relationship.

## **BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Having fun together as a family takes practice. Creative thinking can help you and other family members come up with interesting ideas that cost very little. It can be as simple as a walk around the block. Come up with one thing that your family can do together every week. Think about how conflict could ruin the event. Set ground rules to avoid family arguments. For instance, a family might decide to take turns in choosing a movie to watch every Friday night. This will avoid arguing about who gets to pick. Guidelines for choosing the movie also might need to be set so that everyone is clear on what is acceptable and what is not. These types of ground rules help to avoid arguments that could ruin a fun evening.

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