



KID TALK

How to Communicate with a Child

by Amber Lanier Nagle

Dudley Evenson didn't set out to devise a strategy to foster constructive, nurturing communications between parents and their offspring.

Yet as she and her husband, Dean, raised their three children decades ago, timeless guiding principles emerged.

"We were like other parents—learning

and growing along with our children," says Evenson, a certified professional life coach, musician and co-founder of the instrumental recording label Soundings of the Planet (*Soundings.com*), in Bellingham, Washington. "Then, in the early 1980s, I met Joshua Halpern, who wanted to include our perspectives and techniques in his book, *Children of the Dawn: Visions of the New Family*."

So she shared her way of cultivating kind, caring and empathetic youngsters that has worked for two generations of her family: "Our role is not to impose our beliefs on children and grandchildren, but to guide and help them develop their dreams, visions, paths and passions." Other experts agree.

Stay Clear. Evenson contends that children are often mirrors of the surrounding moods and attitudes, so our example is paramount. "Children absorb our feelings and emotions," says Melanie Hogin, a social worker who counsels foster families in greater Nashville. "'Transference' is its textbook term. Stay calm and clear when you are around children, and keep the lines of communication open."

Be Consistent. Evenson maintains, "Mom and Dad or the primary parental figures should try to establish a unified, mutually supportive program."

"Consistency is one of the cornerstones of effective parenting," says Dana Cool-

ey-Keith, with 20 years of experience working with families in crisis in Northwest Georgia. “Even if it’s hard, it’s particularly important for divorced parents to be consistent and on the same page. Otherwise, it creates stress for the entire family, adding more confusion to a child’s life when the noncustodial parent allows something the custodial parent doesn’t.”

Be positive, honest, flexible, reasonable and understanding. “It is key to explain things to children and to listen to them,” says Evenson’s daughter, Cristen Olsen, of Seattle, who raised her daughter using her family’s guiding principles, and now uses them as a nanny. “It helps them learn how to process situations and find their own resolutions to difficult problems.”

Olsen says she becomes a mediator when the siblings she cares for don’t agree. “We solve the problem together by hearing all sides, talking through the issues and reaching for understanding. Many times, the kids come up with their own solutions.”

Provide meaningful boundaries and restrictions. Kids typically push to find their limits. “Establish limits and boundaries when children are young,” says Cooley-Keith. “They will be more accepting of rules if you establish them earlier, rather than later. Most often, boundaries provide security for kids.”

Accept their point of view. Evenson always encouraged her children to voice their opinions. “This is a great point,” says Hogin. “For children to learn to have opinions and speak out, we must value what they say. We don’t have to agree with everything they say, but should listen and encourage them to find their voice and use their words.”

Trust children. “Believe in them,” affirms Evenson. “Be on their side. Let them feel your support and love.”

Don’t nag. “We all want children to develop their own sense of responsibility,” Olsen says. “I find making strong eye contact reinforces my words, so I don’t have to nag or repeat myself often.”

Be available, rather than putting kids on the spot in public. “If you correct or redirect a child in front of

others, they will probably be focused on being embarrassed and fail to understand the lesson or reasoning a parent is trying to project,” says Hogin. “Taking a step back and working out an issue one-on-one is usually more appropriate and effective.”

Maintain good habits. Evenson emphasizes the character strength that comes from observing and practicing good habits and healthy lifestyles that avoids gossip and incorporates creative exploration

of life. This includes “Doing everything in love,” she notes. Such all-encompassing love balances love for our own children with love for all children and respect for all life.

Be patient with yourself. “No one is perfect,” Evenson remarks. “Just do your best. Guide, console and discipline while keeping a sense of humor.”

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