

# FAMILY FOCUS

## Understanding Interpersonal Communication

Poor communication can often lead to misunderstandings between people. In turn, misunderstandings can lead to a breakdown in relationships between individuals and groups.

We can improve our communication skills. Through improving our abilities to communicate clearly and accurately we can avoid many of the misunderstandings that lead to tensions and conflicts in our interpersonal relationships.

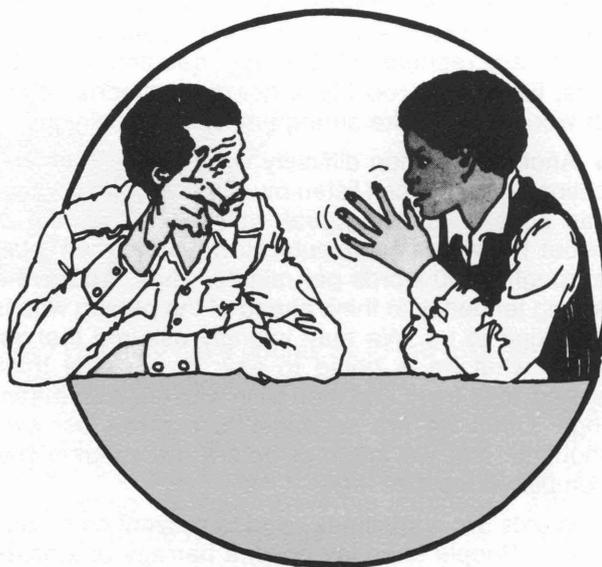
### What Is Communication?

By definition communication means to impart, to pass along, to make known, to give and receive information. The word "communication" comes from the Latin word "communis" which means common. Therefore, when we attempt to communicate we are trying to establish a "commonness" with another individual or with a group. In a basic sense we are trying to share. We also communicate for other reasons that are closely related. We communicate to:

- exchange ideas
- gain knowledge
- increase our understanding of others
- test our own thoughts
- reduce tension and resolve conflicts
- make friends
- help solve problems
- do our jobs more effectively
- express all kinds of feelings such as joy, anger, fear, love, hostility and contentment

Interpersonal communication is much more than just the exchange of words between two people. It is what we say, how we say it, why we say it, when we say it and what we neglect to say. It is our facial expressions, our gestures, our posture, our vocal tones. In other words, it includes a whole set of actions or techniques which make up a language of the body — body language, or nonverbal language.

*Extension family life education specialists, The Texas A&M University System.*



COMMUNICATION HELPS SOLVE PROBLEMS

### Basic Elements of Communication

Broken down into its most basic form, interpersonal communication has three distinct elements:

- 1) a sender: the person who speaks or who has a message to send.
- 2) a message: the idea, thought, information, feeling or emotion to be communicated.
- 3) a receiver: the person for whom the message is intended, in other words, the listener or observer.

At first glance, this all seems so very simple — sender, message, receiver. We use words to deliver a message to someone else.

### Verbal Communication

Words are an important part of the communication process. But there is so much more to sending and receiving messages than the mere exchange of words.

- Each individual has a different background of experience. The differing experience gives words their meanings. Thus the same words often have different meanings for different people. To a parent, "late" may mean midnight, while to a teenager it may mean 1:30 or 2:00 a.m. To speak of a full moon will imply different things to the astrologer, to the surf fisherman and to the poet.

- Some words stir the emotions. Because a certain word may arouse or stimulate strong emotions, we sometimes have difficulty in listening to what is actually being said. A certain word may get us sidetracked and into some personal feelings that are not related to the message of the moment; or else we tend to interpret that word in terms of our own meanings. Examples of some common emotionally tinged words are redneck, hippie, gay, abortion and welfare. Each of us has his or her own personal listing of words that evoke strong emotions or opinions.

- Another common difficulty with verbal communication is that we can listen much faster than another can speak. We can speak at an average rate of about 125 words per minute. However, we can listen at roughly 400 words per minute. Thus, we have a strong tendency to think ahead of the person who is speaking to us. We may wrongly assume that we know what he is going to say; or we may think ahead, lose track and then fill in with our own meanings. Often we are so eager to express our own thoughts that we interrupt before the speaker has completed his message.

- Words are sometimes used to prevent communication. People often lay down a barrage or smoke-screen of words as a common way of hiding true feelings. Sometimes we just keep talking (it doesn't matter much what we say as long as it is trivial) in order to avoid dealing with the genuine feelings that we may be experiencing.

### Nonverbal Communication

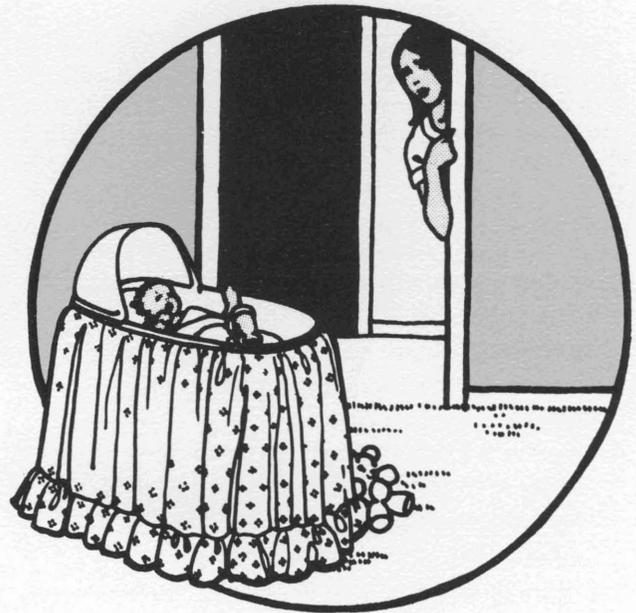
Frequently, we take for granted that words are the basic tools of communication. They are extremely important and that is why we must use them carefully if we are to convey our messages accurately. But as a part of interpersonal communications, nonverbal messages play a very significant role. In fact, it has been estimated that up to 70 percent of the most meaningful communication between people is of the nonverbal type. Facts, knowledge and information are essentially communicated by verbal language. On the other hand, feelings, emotions, attitudes, biases and prejudices are communicated basically through nonverbal language or body language.

As humans we are first emotional and only secondly are we intellectual beings. Therefore, many significant messages are nonverbal. And we certainly have to process or deal with these types of messages while we are relating to the verbal messages.

Words are the basic tools of verbal language. However, nonverbal language has many components:

- posture and body position
- facial expressions
- voice inflection and tone
- rate of speech
- gestures and mannerisms
- behavior and actions
- and many others

Before a baby can talk he is able to communicate different needs and feelings to others. Babies smile, gurgle, reach, stiffen muscles, twist, make faces and cry. And their crying differs depending on the situation.



NONVERBAL MESSAGES

From a distance, observe two people in conversation. Even though you cannot hear the words, you can tell whether they are business-like, hostile, cordial, at ease, flirting or whatever.

With the sound turned down, watch a TV program. You will find that you can get a rather accurate idea of what is going on. You may not be able to explain it in detail. But you will have picked up the general drift of the situation.



BODY LANGUAGE

### Awareness of Body Language

There are some components of body language of which we are conscious in others and in ourselves. These are likely to be such deliberate gestures as handshakes, waves, head nods, smiles, shoulder shrugs, etc. But often we are not aware of other components of body language either in ourselves or in others. These might be actions such as tight muscles, raised eyebrows, clenched fists, perspiration, breathing rate and the space or distance that we place between ourselves and others.

While it is true that we may not be aware of these signals in a conscious way, we are still receiving and responding to the messages that they indicate. Thus, sometimes a part of us receives one message (perhaps the message that one is consciously trying to convey), while another part of our being picks up another message, which conflicts with the first one. For example: You meet an acquaintance on the street. The person smiles, shakes your hand and says, "I'm so happy to see you." That is one message, the apparent or conscious one. But there is another message. The smile was fleeting, the handshake was hurried and the eyes seemed to have been looking past you.

How does such an incident make you feel? Confused? A bit uneasy? Irritated? Hurt? It probably depends on how you interpreted the total situation. But you did get two different messages and the range of possible interpretations leaves a lot of room for misunderstanding. Or maybe you understood all too clearly the second "unconscious" message. Either

way you may have doubts as to the acquaintance's genuine happiness at seeing you.

How often do you send or convey two different messages with what you think is one obvious message? Are you always aware of what you are communicating via your nonverbal language? Are you alert to the body language messages of others?

### Improving Relationships With Others

We can improve the quality of our interpersonal communication. In turn, this can help us in improving our relationships with others. In order to do this, we must become aware of the various important elements of communication. As this happens, we can become more accurate and honest in both our verbal and nonverbal language. And as we become more sensitive to this process in ourselves, we also become more perceptive and alert to the various subtle messages that others are sending. Thus, we become more effective listeners. We learn to listen to the total person and not just their words. And if we listen with empathy and compassion we can really begin to know and understand others in a deeper and more humane way.

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