

# HOME BASE



An E-journal on Christian Family Life

## That's Using Your Ears!

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In their book, *Empowering Couples*, David Olson and Amy Olson begin the chapter on communication by stating: "Developing a relationship without communication is like trying to make orange juice without oranges: it is impossible."<sup>1</sup> Communication is the only means by which we can choose to let another person inside our life.

Some say love is a choice. So is communication. But, willingness is not the only factor when it comes to good communication. Communication that builds greater relational intimacy involves skill and hard work. The good news is that these skills can be learned and improved upon with practice.

In our work as family educators, my husband and I have noticed how uncommon it is for families to have had role models of healthy communication. As a result, we use a practice known as the Speaker/Listener Technique<sup>2</sup> with every couple in pre-marital counseling and in our work with parents and children. This approach to communication provides a structure of safety for talking about feelings and ideas and becomes a gateway for effective problem solving and conflict resolution.

The key concept underlying this technique is listening for understanding. We are predisposed to formulate our own response rather than focusing on what the other is saying. This often results in inaccurate expectations and hurt feelings and can lead to a breakdown in relational intimacy. People report that when they feel heard and understood they also feel valued. This sense of valuing has the effect of inviting greater intimacy.

Another key benefit of the technique is that it tends to interrupt patterns of communication that are destructive in relationships. Patterns like accusing, blaming and defensiveness are stopped before they can escalate and result in hurt, anger, distrust and relational distancing.

The Speaker/Listener Technique feels unnatural to use at first. Like any new skill, individuals will become



more comfortable with practice. The rules of the Speaker/Listener Technique are simple:

### Rules for the Speaker:

1. Speak for yourself. Don't mind-read! Use "I" messages to express your thoughts and feelings.
2. Keep statements brief. Don't go on and on. Your Listener will more easily process brief statements.
3. Stop to let the Listener paraphrase. Wait for the Listener to rephrase what he or she heard you say.

### Rules for the Listener:

1. Paraphrase what you hear. "What I heard you say is ..."
2. Focus on the Speaker's message. Don't give your own opinion. Wait until you are the Speaker to make your response. Your goal is to accurately understand what the other person is saying.

### Rules for Both:

1. The Speaker has the Floor. The Speaker can hold an object during the conversation as a signal for who has the floor.
2. The Speaker keeps the Floor while the Listener paraphrases.
3. Share the Floor.

Family members who practice using the technique while talking about easy topics will enable more constructive communication when dealing with topics that are more difficult. How would your family relationships change if each member felt heard and understood by the others?

"Communication works for those who work at it."  
John Powell

<sup>1</sup> Olson, David, Olson, Amy, *Empowering Couples: Building on Your Strengths*, ©2000, Life Innovation, Inc.; Minneapolis, MN, [www.lifeinnovations.com](http://www.lifeinnovations.com)

<sup>2</sup> Markman, Howard, Stanley, Scott, Blumberg, Susan L., *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*, ©1994, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, [www.prepinc.com](http://www.prepinc.com).

# Family Talk Discussion

The family strengths theory identifies “communication” among the six characteristics of strong families. The following family ministry professionals were invited to respond to a set of questions about family communication:

**Dr. Stephen Peirce**, founder and director of Pacific Christian Counseling Center, with more than 30 years of experience in individual and family counseling.

**Dr. A. Paul Vasconcellos**, licensed marriage and family therapist and emeritus professor of theology at Concordia University, Nebraska. Vasconcellos is also an instructor in the family ministry graduate program at Concordia.

**Dr. Richard Hardel**, former executive director and Senior Fellow of The Youth & Family Institute. Hardel has been active in youth and family ministry all his life and is co-author of *Passing On The Faith: A Radical Model for Youth & Family Ministry*.

I believe you will find their comments offer helpful insight into the dynamics that contribute to helping parents and children talk with one another.

**Question:** What is most important for parents to remember when seeking to develop good communication with their children?

**Peirce:** Seek first to understand. Sometimes you will disagree and that is OK.

**Vasconcellos:** Rapport, being approachable and trust . . . I believe we need to do a lot of work in helping parents to understand these issues and the positive behaviors needed to make these things happen.

**Hardel:** Children should see the love of Christ in the love that their mother and father share with each other as well as with them. The children should know from birth or adoption that their parents create a safe place and a healthy atmosphere for them to wonder and grow. From this atmosphere they should learn that they can talk to their parents about anything. Feelings are neither right nor wrong. Feelings are simply yours or someone else’s. It is not about judging feelings. It is always about seeing the grace of God.

**Follow-up Question:** Is there a particular skill you coach parents to practice when communicating with their children?

**Peirce:** Paraphrasing and validating. Understanding feelings is critical for a child. Again, you may disagree that the child has that perspective, but as long as the child feels heard, it can significantly aid with communication.

**Vasconcellos:** With my 6-year-old granddaughter, I

may say, “Tell me what you heard grandpa say.” With my 35-year-old son I may say, “This is what I hear you telling me.” Also, learning to speak using “I messages” is very useful.

**Hardel:** From Ephesians 6, I work with parents to help them learn how to set clear boundaries that help their children see God. . . . It is not to say “No” because I said so. It is to say “No,” because the situation the child is in, or headed to, is one . . . in which the child or youth will not be able to see God’s love and mercy.

I help [parents] learn to ask an open-ended question and then to patiently wait for the child or youth to process the question and answer.

**Question:** There seems to be a myth affecting parent and teen communication that says neither really wants to talk with the other. Research shows the opposite is true. What advice do you have for parents and teens to open up communication?

**Peirce:** First, understand that the teen years can be difficult. But they can be viewed more as a time of growth, rather than a negative experience. Teenagers are going through a lot of transition . . . the desire to be more independent, but also a need for security and love. It is important for each parent to have individual time with their teen, as sometimes the teenager feels more comfortable with various topics with a certain parent. Ask questions, seek answers.

**Vasconcellos:** Parents will often say, “My son (daughter) will not talk with me.” Teenagers will often say, “My parents will not listen to me!” I might ask a teenager, “How does mom and/or dad talk to you?” They might reply, “They don’t talk. They yell.” Or, “They have their mind made up, and they don’t seem to be interested in learning about my point of view or how I feel.” Or, “Why should I talk to them anyway? It always ends up with a lot of anger and arguing.” . . . The challenge is to help them communicate more effectively with each



other. Here, the Speaker-Listener Technique or Active Listening is a most helpful training tool. But more—I have to teach parents and teens to take a “deep breath,” calm down, and then try to talk. Earlier this year, after teaching a family the Speaker/Listener technique, coaching them in practice, and getting them to talk about issues they needed to talk about, I asked the 16-year-old son, “What do you think about this method of communication?” He said, “It’s cool. I think my parents finally listened to me!”

**Hardel:** Parents, grandparents, and other care-giving adults should talk to children and youth about what God is doing with them, not what the children and youth should do. . . . Send “I” messages rather than [you] messages. The research also shows that parents must set clear boundaries for their children.

## **Question:** If communication has been limited in nature, what would you suggest to a family desiring to create new patterns for their communication?

**Peirce:** One idea is to set a family meeting to facilitate communication or share ideas, concerns, frustrations, etc. A helpful symbol of who is speaking or who “has the floor” can be an egg timer, where each person has a turn to speak for three minutes. Some people do better with writing than talking, so letters to one another or a family journal or notebook can also be other forms to generate discussions.

**Vasconcellos:** I would ask what new patterns do they think they want and are these patterns a reasonable fit for who they are. Family members need to understand and be reasonably comfortable with who they are and what their personalities are like. For example . . . as communicators, some folks are “painters” and some folks are “pointers.” The painter, who takes a long time to explain something, and often goes on and on, does not have to be nor should be a pointer. The pointer gets right to the point, using few words, and the pointer does not have to be a painter. Both styles are okay. However, people with differing styles have the challenge of being patient with each other and learning to tolerate one another’s style.

**Hardel:** I am mostly concerned with faith formation. At The Youth & Family Institute, we have shared four key faith practices that are essential:

1. Caring Conversations (including talking about faith).
2. Devotions together (including reading Bible storybooks and Bible).
3. Service to others that flows from faith.
4. Rituals and Traditions that keep them connected to God.

## **Question:** Are there other insights you care to offer?

**Peirce:** Always seek first to understand one another.

**Vasconcellos:** A big problem today is that families are “too busy” to really talk with each other. . . . More and more folks need someone who will listen to them and hear not only what they are saying, but also how they are feeling.

For there to be good communication there has to be a safe environment—emotional safety, physical safety. Without safety there will be no openness. As we think about how we communicate with our children, and what we communicate, we have to ask ourselves, “Does my communication with my child(ren) convey to them a sense of my respect for them, a sense that they matter, a sense that their thoughts and feelings are validated?”

I will often ask families to work hard to have at least one meal a day together. . . . And the rule is—talk and listen to each other—no TV or other electronic devices that will interfere with good communication. I was asked not long ago, “Well, what if we have nothing to say?” I said, “In that case, savor your food and just enjoy being—and, hopefully, [being] together!”

## READER REQUEST

### HOLIDAY TRADITIONS & RITUALS

For many families, the transcendent meaning of traditions and rituals associated with observing holidays testifies to the powerful influence they have for contributing to family identity and a sense of belonging. These may take the shape of rituals handed down for generations or declare the establishment of a new family identity.

What holiday traditions and rituals inspire a strong connection with your family? Share your family’s Thanksgiving and Christmas traditions with us at *Home Base* for possible publication in the November issue.

E-mail your holiday reflections by Oct. 1 to the editor at [rgfossu@hotmail.com](mailto:rgfossu@hotmail.com).



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