



Winter 2007

Connecting With Kids Communication Strategies for Volunteers

By Jennifer Goddard, Bank Street College of Education

"This is a dumb story."

"I hate math."

"This is boring."

If you are a national service member or volunteer working with youth, you may have heard statements like these. Or, you may have experienced the "silent treatment." Your response to these statements and behaviors has important implications—from framing the nature of your relationship with youth to influencing how they respond to future frustration and problems.

Effective communication is an essential tool for volunteer mentors and tutors. Both activities depend on productive interactions between children and adults that build children's trust and motivate them to succeed. Indeed, many educators believe that effective communication is the most important skill those who work with youth can develop.

One would think developing communication skills would be easy, given the advanced means of communication and information sharing available today. But communication is more than just imparting information to children and youth; it is a way to model

language, decision making, and values. In essence, communication is an opportunity to develop:

- Relationships
- Critical thinking skills
- Cognitive skills for reading, writing, and thinking

For example, if your response to the first statement above were, "No, it's a very interesting story," you would miss a chance to let the child explore why she feels the way she does about the story. Responding with an observation instead—such as, "There's something about the story you don't like"—puts the child's feelings into words so they're identified and accepted, and encourages the child to continue to articulate her response.

This issue of *The Tutor* aims to provide national service and volunteer tutors and mentors with strategies for and practical examples of effective communication, with an emphasis on developing positive self-esteem in children and youth served. These strategies and tips will, over time and with patience and practice, help make your interactions with young people more positive and productive.

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- Connect with peers
- Brainstorm solutions
- Design and deliver training

Defining Communication

In educational settings, communication can be defined in terms of the dialogue that takes place between the educator and the student. “All learning involves conversation. The ongoing dialogue, internal and external, that occurs as we read, write, listen, compose, observe, refine, interpret and analyze is how we learn” (Routman, 1999).

Building Relationships

Effective communication begins with building relationships. The seeds of good communication are often “rooted in a shared history” that develops between people “over time through a track record of trust, mutual respect, rapport, and credibility. When [adults] consistently listen to students, take them seriously, tell the truth, keep promises, and respect feelings, young people are much more likely to really listen to what they say and to respond positively” (Ramsey, 2002).

At the outset of your work with youth, think first about establishing the relationship. According to Nina Phillips, a volunteer leader in New York City, one should “explore ways of setting up the kind of rapport that is needed to spark learning. The personal interest you show in the child may well be the catalyst that makes him recognize his own worth and his ability to achieve.”

Communication strategies that help build relationships include effective listening, supportive nonverbal communication, and age-appropriate communication strategies.

Effective Listening

Think how frustrating it is when someone doesn’t listen to you or your message is misunderstood (or perhaps even ignored). Have you ever felt the urge to say, “Will you just *listen* to me?” This frustration can have a negative effect on our relationships.

Listening is more than just sitting quietly, waiting for your turn to talk or offer your opinion; listening is an active part of the process of gaining information and insights about people (including ourselves) and the world.

Active listening—the purposeful listening to and acknowledgment of what another person is saying—helps build the trust, empathy, and understanding that are the foundation of healthy relationships. It involves concentrating on what the speaker is saying, asking reflective questions to clarify, and re-stating what the speaker has said to confirm that you’ve understood.

Active listening can be an effective communication strategy in working with children and youth. But what does this look like?



Consider the following scenario (adapted from Faber and Mazlish, 1987, and Geddes, 1995) and accompanying mentor-mentee interaction in which the mentor uses active listening skills:

| Scenario | |
|---|--|
| You sense that your mentee is feeling a certain emotion so you ask her about it by guessing, "You seem upset today. What happened?" She begins to tell you about an incident on the bus after school. | |
| Active Listener's Response | Why It Works |
| Face the child, lean in to listen, and look her in the eye. As she speaks, nod, and wait for appropriate times to speak or ask questions. | Giving your undivided attention and using body language that expresses interest shows you are interested in what she has to say and prompts her to speak. As she talks, stay on topic, refrain from interrupting, and avoid distractions to show your continued interest and attention. |
| * Child says, "That bus driver is always mean. He yelled at me today for no reason!" | |
| Active Listener's Response | Why It Works |
| Offer a descriptive observation or objective response, such as: "You sound angry." -or- "Being yelled at must've really upset you." | While you may feel tempted to defend or explain another adult's behavior ("There must have been a reason for him to yell"), your purpose is to guide the child's thinking so that she reflects on what happened. Acknowledging the child's feelings and putting the child's feelings into words ("upset," "angry," "embarrassed") pave the way for the child to explain further. |
| * Child then says, "Everyone laughed after he yelled at me." | |
| Active Listener's Response | Why It Works |
| "That must have been embarrassing." | You may feel tempted to defend the child by expressing sorrow at her hurt: "That wasn't very nice," or "I'm sorry to hear that." While empathy is important, the most valuable role you can play as the child speaks is that of an objective audience genuinely interested in what she has to say. |
| * Child explains, "He freaked out because I stood up for just a second. It was just a second! The bus wasn't even going that fast!" | |
| Active Listener's Response | Why It Works |
| "So it didn't seem like a bad thing to you." -or- "I wonder why that made him yell." | Paraphrasing or rephrasing demonstrates you are listening. You may want to offer the child an explanation for what happened, such as, "The bus driver is only concerned for your safety," but this explanation would most benefit the child if she came up with it herself. Thus, use probing questions or statements to prompt a child to move toward settling the issue. |

Nonverbal Cues That Affect Communication

Body orientation: Facing the speaker v. turning away

Posture: Alert, open posture v. slouching or crossed arms

Gestures: Playing with your hair or jewelry v. focusing on the speaker

Facial expressions: Frowning v. smiling

Eyes: Looking around the room v. direct eye contact

Supportive Nonverbal Communication

A second communication strategy that helps build relationships with children and youth is supportive **nonverbal communication**. Posture, body language, tone of voice, and other physical signals we give as we speak can support—or contradict—the actual words we use as we talk to children.

“Children are far better at reading body language than adults. They are much more apt to watch what the adult does than what he says” (Carter & Dapper, 1972). For example, if you tell a student how happy you are to see him with your arms crossed and a distracted look on your face, he is likely to conclude that you do not like him. When your words don’t match your body language, people become confused and distrustful.

Keep in mind, too, that different cultures have different norms and customs related to body language and nonverbal cues. For example, in some cultures it is a sign of disrespect for youth to make direct eye contact with adults; in the United States, we expect youth to look adults in the eye to show that they are paying attention. An awareness of nonverbal messages will help you establish a more responsive and helpful line of communication with children and youth. The sidebar above outlines the most common and revealing examples of body language. In your work with children and youth, strive to be aware, observant, and sensitive to nonverbal forms of communication (on your part and theirs).

Age-Appropriate Communication Strategies

A third communication strategy that helps build relationships with children and youth is tailoring your communication style for children of different age groups. The best way to communicate is to simply say what you mean using straight-forward language;

however, just as there are differences in the way you communicate with a coworker and your boss, there are age-appropriate ways to communicate with young people. Consider the following suggestions (Ramsey, 2002):

Elementary School

- Talk *with* younger children (not *at* them).
- Help them name their feelings (i.e., fear, embarrassment, jealousy, anger, happiness).
- Get down to their height. Kneeling, crouching, sitting, and leaning forward will make it easier to connect with them.
- Stick to simple language and concrete terms when giving directions.
- Use lots of action words and colorful language for description.
- Be upbeat, confident, optimistic, and encouraging.
- Check for understanding. Observe facial expressions.



Middle and High School

- Ask **open-ended questions** (see sidebar) and elicit explanations.
- Invite and accept opinions.
- Strive to be nonjudgmental; avoid being “preachy” by refraining from absolutes such as “always,” “never,” “should,” and “ought.”
- Avoid overusing slang; it runs the risk of trivializing what you’re saying. You are an adult and they will respect you more if you speak like one.
- Don’t personalize teenagers’ need to rebel against authority and test limits.
- Be warm and inviting but cautious about how familiar you become with teenagers; over-familiarity can breed misunderstandings.
- Respect privacy and confidentiality (within legal limits).

Using active listening, supportive nonverbal communication, and age-appropriate communication strategies can help you have the kinds of interactions that foster strong relationships with your tutee or mentee. Positive relationships, in turn, are the basis of successful mentoring and tutoring.

Fostering Critical Thinking Skills

In addition to building the relationships that are essential to successful tutoring and mentoring, effective communication also fosters critical thinking skills in children and youth. These skills can be taught explicitly in the context of academic work, but you can also boost

these skills as you help young people negotiate their relationship with you. Help your tutee or mentee develop critical thinking skills by encouraging him or her to understand and respect boundaries, by being attentive to how you give advice, by modeling effective conflict-management skills, and by responding productively to inappropriate behaviors and words.

Self-Disclosure

Building a relationship with a child or youth involves recognizing and establishing boundaries. Boundaries outline how far people can go with comfort in a relationship; healthy boundaries build trust, which is crucial (Whitfield, 1993). While sharing personal information is healthy, it’s a

Using Open-Ended Questions

Direct questions often imply a right or wrong answer and children, who naturally don’t want to be wrong, can be put off by them. You can avoid this problem by asking open-ended questions and making observations or statements. This approach also helps children and youth:

- **Label and organize their thinking**—“When authors write a story, they often have lots of different ideas about what might happen to the main character.” Pause and allow response. Probe further with: “What would you like to happen to the character in the story you are writing?”
- **Describe what they already know**—“I can tell you know a lot about the library. Let’s make a list—I’ll do the writing.”
- **Anticipate and wonder**—“Today we are going to be scientists. What will happen to these fruits if we slice them and leave them on the table for the weekend?” Or, “One of the things that readers do is make guesses about the book based on the pictures. Let’s look at the picture on the cover of this book; what do you think it will be about?”
- **Reflect on an experience**—“What did you see on our visit to the courthouse?” Or, “Tell me what you liked the most about the game we went to.”
- **Think about possible ideas or solutions to problems**—“Tell me how you solved the problem. That’s a good approach; what would be another?” Or, “Let’s think about different ways you could show your favorite part of the story.”

By listening to young people’s responses, you will glean vital information necessary for planning next steps (Adapted from Bickart, Jablon & Dodge, 1999).

Talking about Feelings

What do you do when a child or youth is troubled but doesn't want to talk about it? Asking them to describe their feelings ("What are you feeling?" "Why are you unhappy?") can cause children to shut down rather than open up. Just as adults can be private and choose not to share, so can children and youth. Some strategies include:

- Encourage them to explain the source of their feelings by saying, "Help me understand why you feel this way."
- Venture a guess, such as, "It hurts to be teased," to indicate that you are available if the child wants to talk.
- Invite conversation by offering, "Something difficult must have happened today," or "Would you like to talk about it?" If the child responds with "I don't want to talk about it," respect his wishes.
- Be sensitive to youth's needs and aware of signals indicating they don't want to talk.

As long as youth know you are there for them when (and if) they want to talk, you've done all you can.

balancing act that can quickly turn unhealthy. To avoid blurring appropriate boundaries:

- Refrain from sharing intimate information about yourself
- Don't lend or borrow money
- Avoid giving your personal phone number or address
- Limit your meetings to scheduled times during specified program hours/activities
- Remember that there are other important adults in the youth's life

Your program likely has policies and procedures in place that address these and other issues related to boundaries. It may be helpful to review them occasionally; in the course of working with a child or youth over time, the line between appropriate and inappropriate disclosure may become blurred.

A judicious approach to self-disclosure is best. It also reinforces for your tutee or mentee the importance of tact and respect in adult relationships.

Giving Advice

The way you give advice to a young person is equally important to establishing healthy boundaries and building a strong relationship. It is possible to offer advice constructively in the context of a child/youth-led discussion.

When a young person seeks your advice, hear him out and tentatively ask (Faber & Mazlish, 1995):

- "How would you feel about...?"
- "Do you think it would help if...?"
- "Does it make sense to...?"
- "What do you think would happen if...?"

Questions like these give the child or youth the chance to accept, reject, or explore your suggestions.

Treat the information children and youth share with confidentiality; don't discuss it with others except on a need-to-know basis. Be aware of the laws in your state regarding confidentiality issues; in general, mandated reporting laws say that anyone involved with children is required to report child abuse. The law also enforces penalties for failure to report. Laws vary, as do program policies and procedures; ask your program supervisor for detailed information.

Dealing With Conflict and Difficult Situations

Many people tense up at the thought of dealing with conflict. While conflict itself is not necessarily negative, our reactions to it generally are. Conflict is a natural part of life, however, and can help us grow.

For mentors especially, it is important to understand children and youth may "test" your commitment to them by deliberately instigating conflict to see how you respond. They may also "act out" roles others may have cast them in—for example, the

troublemaker, the failing student, or the careless-mistake-maker. Although it's often difficult to do so, try to see the conflict or difficulty as the testing or acting-out behavior it is and not take it personally as an attack or failure.

When your relationship with a child or youth reaches a point of conflict, it's your role as the adult to see that the conflict is handled in a productive way. People who handle conflict constructively (Adler & Towne, 1993):

- Check to find out what the other is thinking
- Let each other know that they understand the other side
- Admit to being defensive if they are, but then focus on solving the problem

Rather than being a detriment to your relationship with a young person, working through conflict can serve to strengthen and deepen your bond, if handled well.

Responding to Inappropriate Behavior and Words

When dealing with conflict with children or youth, it's hard to ignore when they misbehave or say, "I hate you" and other hurtful things. Keeping your cool and responding objectively can go a long way to reinforce positive conflict-management skills.

The following steps can help calm your own reaction to a provocative word or behavior while directing the child or youth toward more appropriate language or actions:

- Count to 10 and remind yourself between each number that you're an adult who needs to model good behavior.
- After counting to 10, calmly say, "I don't like what I just heard/saw. If you're angry, tell me in

another way and I'll be glad to listen to you." Reacting with hostility will only validate the young person's anger or escalate emotions.

Bad Words, Good Responses

You have a menu of options for responding constructively to inappropriate words and/or behavior (Faber & Mazlish, 1995):

- **Point out a way to be helpful:** "I hear your frustration but it would be helpful if you could express it without cursing."
- **Express your strong disapproval (without attacking character):** "That kind of language upsets me."
- **State your expectations:** "I expect you to find some other way to let me know how frustrated you are."
- **Show how to make amends:** "What I'd like to see is a list of some strong words that you could use instead of the inappropriate one you just said. Use the dictionary or thesaurus if you need help."
- **Offer a choice:** "You can curse to yourself in your head or you can use words that won't offend anyone."

How you establish and reinforce boundaries, give advice, handle conflict, and respond to inappropriate behavior and words with children and youth will affect whether they approach similar issues in their own lives in a constructive or un-constructive manner. Remaining objective and including your tutee or mentee in identifying the sources and solutions to issues that emerge in your relationship helps them have ownership of the outcome and an incentive to improve.

- Think about your own child or one who is very special to you. Imagine how you would want an adult to treat her. The same fairness, sensitivity, and high expectations should be reflected in the way we treat all youth.
- Outline and clearly discuss your expectations for positive behavior.

For example, if a child or youth is banging on the underside of a desk, you can:

- Describe the problem: "I hear a banging sound that's very disruptive."
- Give information: "It's hard to concentrate when there's a disruptive noise."

- Offer a choice: “You can turn your chair or move away from the desk.”
- Describe what you feel: “I don’t like hearing a banging sound.”
- Be playful: “Are we studying or trying out for band?” (adapted from Faber & Mazlish, 1995)

Building Cognitive Skills

Effective communication helps build the relationship between you and your tutee or mentee, and helps develop critical-thinking and self-discipline skills that will contribute to productive interactions with others. It can also boost intellectual development.

Language Development

Language development is the first step toward literacy; it makes reading and writing possible because we use language to process the world around us. Using language builds vocabulary, an essential part of learning to read fluently and understand complex concepts. One study found that, on average:

- Children in lower income families know 4,000 words by age six.
- Children in higher income families know 20,000 words by age six.
- Three-year-olds in higher income families had larger recorded vocabularies than the parents in lower income families (Hart & Risley, 1999).

As a tutor or mentor, you can help support a child or youth’s language development by finding opportunities to drop in slightly more complex words than the child is likely to hear on a daily basis. Even something as simple as replacing the basic, “I’m happy to see you” with “I’m delighted to see you” is helpful.

Talking To Learn

As children and youth grow, adults influence their development through our responses to them. If we respond to their efforts constructively and engage them in conversations about what they are doing, we can have a positive influence on their future academic and career success.

Language development (see sidebar) is a key component of your interaction with youth. There is a major difference between “learning to talk” and “talking to learn.” Children learn by using language themselves, rather than by listening to adults talk to them. When you work one-on-one with children and youth, you have a unique chance to engage them in conversation and create opportunities for them to think and articulate their ideas. The more young people talk, the more insight you gain into their thinking.

Ways to help children and youth “talk to learn” include:

- **Inviting children and youth to explain their work.** Ask questions that require them to explain what they are working on and the results they hope to achieve. Allow young people ample time to explain in their own words what they are doing—this will help them clarify their ideas and reinforce what they are learning. For example:

- “You have a lot of bubbles in the water table. How did they get there?”
- “I wonder what will happen to the bubbles.”

For older youth, focus on modeling language and follow-up questions:

- “Your research for this paper is very thorough. I wonder which of these sources was the most interesting to you.”
- “I’m intrigued by this song; I’d love to know more about the experiences behind the lyrics.”

- **Resisting the urge to give the right answer.** At times, it can be difficult to resist the urge to offer the correct answer on a school

assignment your tutee or mentee is working on. Mentors may also experience frustration when a child or youth grapples with problems that beg for their advice. While this frustration is understandable, it is important to keep your role in mind at all times: to help children arrive at answers through their own thinking process. Giving the right answer or advice without allowing the child or youth the opportunity to talk through it is rarely the best way to achieve this. Without indicating that an answer is incorrect, you can ask the child or youth to explain how she arrived at the answer. Lead her to the next level of understanding with follow-up questions that foster discussion, such as: “That’s an interesting response to the question. Describe how you got there. Can you think of other ways to arrive at the same answer? A different answer?”

- **Using descriptive praise.** In our own experiences as children, we may have received praise from adults such as “Great job” or “Good work.” While this praise may have been appreciated, it may have also left us feeling anxious or needy to do and hear more. “Good job” on its own doesn’t prompt discussion, thinking, or reflection. Furthermore, “good job” does not indicate that the adult is interested in what youth have accomplished. Instead, use descriptive praise to laud an accomplishment that provides an observation of what the child or youth has done, not an evaluation or interpretation of their work. Descriptive praise reinforces specific positive behaviors and encourages children to continue to use them. Some examples of non-descriptive versus descriptive praise might include:

- “These grades represent all of the hard work and studying you did this quarter. You must be proud,” instead of “Straight A’s! I’m so proud of you!”



- “I noticed that you helped Melissa up and gave her a hug after she tripped and fell,” instead of, “What you did for Melissa was nice. You’re always so thoughtful.”
- “It takes a lot of self-discipline and dedication to continue working when you’re tired,” instead of, “Still doing your homework at this late hour? Good job!”

- **Offering constructive critiques.** Just like adults, children and youth often need an objective person to review their work and advise them on how to improve. Criticism is most helpful if it’s rooted in accomplishments and finishes with what needs to be done. This is especially true for children and youth, who are in the process of learning about making mistakes and subsequent improvements. For example, instead of saying, “There are several spelling errors in this paper,” point out what the child or youth has accomplished and then what needs to be improved: “This paper is very well-researched and gives a thorough explanation of how the printing press was invented. All it needs now is the correct spelling of the words I underlined and it’s ready to go.”

Engaging, praising, and critiquing tutees or mentees in a supportive and intentional fashion enhances their cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Allowing them to talk through problems with minimal intervention on your part encourages the development of a problem-solving approach that will help them with schoolwork and other facets of their lives.

Conclusion

The way you communicate with children and youth conveys important messages. Effective communication builds your relationship with your child or youth, helps develop critical thinking skills, and fosters cognitive growth. Whether you are a volunteer tutor or mentor, helping youth with academic or life skills—or both—the following tips provide a summary of the key approaches discussed in this article:

1. **Avoid communication roadblocks** such as directing, praising, moralizing, lecturing, interpreting, and probing (Gordon, 1974).
2. **Shift the focus** from you to the youth by **asking open-ended questions** that encourage the young person to think and respond.
3. **Allow thinking time** for children and youth to reflect on the question before answering.
4. When the child or youth is talking, **don't interrupt or criticize.**

“Instead, concentrate on the more important fact that he is communicating with you, making you a gift of his thoughts and feelings” (Carter & Dapper, 1972).

5. **Describe what you see.** Describing the work that the child or youth is doing will help her be more conscious of it and provide the opportunity to think about what she is trying to accomplish.

Describing what you see avoids sounding judgmental or evaluative.

6. **Talk about the process.** “How did you create so many new colors when you only started with three?”

7. **Encourage and support continuing efforts.** “That sounds like a good solution for this library’s space-sharing problem. How can we propose it to the library’s staff?”

8. **Encourage children and youth to evaluate their own work.** “Which part of the process do you think was most successful—acting in the play or designing the scenery? I wonder what could be done to improve the next time.”

9. **Help children and youth articulate the feedback they want.** “Decide what you want me to focus on the most when I listen to you read your story.”

10. **Be willing to talk about whatever children and youth really want to talk about.** If you aren’t receptive to their interests or focus on activities and assignments at the expense of the conversation’s natural flow, they will sense it and shut down. If you show that you are genuinely interested in what they want to talk about and have to say, they will be more likely to listen to you!



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LEARNS at the
Northwest Regional
Educational Laboratory
101 SW Main Street, Suite
500
Portland, OR 97204
Toll-free phone:
1-800-361-7890
Fax: (503) 275-0133
Web: www.nwrel.org
E-mail: learns@nwrel.org

Bank Street



LEARNS at the
Bank Street College
of Education
610 West 112th Street
New York, NY 10025
Toll-free phone:
1-800-930-5664
Fax: (212) 875-4547
Web: www.bnkst.edu
E-mail: learns@bnkst.edu

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