

## Communication with Young Children

The University of Arizona • College of Agriculture • Tucson, Arizona 85721

7/98

### Working with the Young Child: Ages 4 - 8

**LYNAS WAUN**  
*Cochise County*

One of the developmental tasks of early childhood is learning to talk. When young, children spend a lot of time listening to those around them. A child will progress from one or two words in communicating to using several words in a sentence by ages four and five. Children generally speak clearly, but may have trouble pronouncing some words.

Parents and caregivers set the stage for communicating with children when very young. It is important to continue speaking to children with patience and by answering questions truthfully as they grow. A child of three may have 900 words in his vocabulary, while a child of five may have over 2000 words.

Communication is sharing a message between two or more people. With young children, it is important that the adult and the child have the same meaning for the message.

When speaking with children as a parent or caregiver:

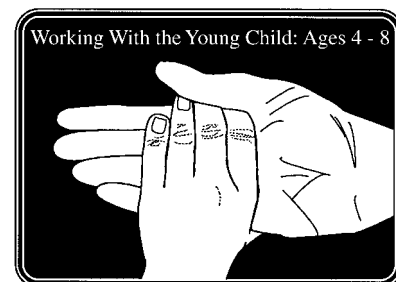
- sit at the child's level and maintain eye contact with the child
- ask questions in words they can understand in a calm, soft voice
- concentrate on what the child is saying
- notice how the child feels.



During the preschool years, ages four to five, the peak age for questioning emerges. Children love to ask the same question over and over. "Why?" seems to be their favorite word. Yes, this can be very frustrating, yet adults have resources that can help them be patient with the child.

Questions are asked for many reasons, to get more information, to get attention or to see if their thinking is right. Sometimes questions make adults uncomfortable, but answering in simple words will often satisfy the child. Taking time to really listen to the young child is

one way to encourage communication between children and adults. As language is developing, adults need to provide ways to increase the child's vocabulary.



**What are some activities parents, grandparents and others can do to increase communication with children?**

1. Reading various books to four and five year old children will develop language skills. Discussing pictures or asking questions about the story will encourage the child to talk.
2. Taking the child for a walk around the neighborhood allows for several topics to talk about. A child may see dogs or cats, birds, cars or trucks, other children, flowers or a ball game.
3. Sharing before going to bed is a good time to have children think back about the day and talk about their feelings. What happened that was funny? What happened that was exciting?

When the adult does not listen or repeatedly tells the child they do not have time to talk, this creates a negative situation which can lead a child to think it is useless to talk at a very young age. Often parents will respond to children with "Uhhh" or "Okay" without really hearing what has been said. Children recognize quickly that their parents or caregivers are not really listening.

Characteristics of negative communication are:

- adults ignoring the child
- adults putting down the child's interests in order to pursue their own
- adults paying superficial attention to the child
- adults using judgmental words that criticize or blame

Communication should preserve the child's self respect, as well as the adults. Children need help in putting their feelings into words. The adult can help by saying, "Josh is crying because he hurt his knee when he fell from his bike." Adults need to avoid the mistake of stereotyping, such as males should not express feelings. Saying "Big boys do not cry" tells boys that feelings should not be talked about or expressed. Adults need to teach children to talk about feelings appropriately.

Modeling by adults continues to be important. Adults need to express anger in ways so children see a positive example. If an adult picks up a glass and throws it, speaking loudly in anger, then the young child will pick up his toy and throw it at the wall, and yell when he is upset about something.

Young children, ages four to eight, need to take part in family discussions. They need to learn at an early age that they are important family members. When they realize their viewpoints are accepted and appreciated, this sharing will strengthen the family.

### "I" Messages

Young children do understand a positive form of communication, the "I" message. An adult can communicate their frustration or disappointment to school aged children without accusing or blaming. "I" messages are not threatening.

**The format for the "I" message is:**

**When you** (state specific behavior.)

**Then I feel** (state feelings.)

**Because** (state cause or reason.)

When the adult speaks in a calm manner, you express your unhappy feelings without anger and place the responsibility on the child to change his or her behavior.

Examples of "I" messages are:

1. When you do not help put your toys away before bedtime, I feel irritated, because I need extra time to work on the school carnival booth.
2. When you do not complete your homework in the evening, I feel concerned, as we are very busy in the morning and you may not get your homework finished.
3. When you do not feed and water the rabbits, I feel upset, because I know your pets are hungry and thirsty.

Parent-child communication during the early school years increases. However, since there is less direct contact, parents and caregivers need to take time to talk and listen. As children grow older, they forget chores, may talk back, or fail to show for dinner on time. Parents need to be careful to avoid being negative or to communicate criticism at ages six to eight. Adults need to respond patiently to each situation which may not always be easy. Using the "I" message technique can reduce frustration.

### How can I create a positive environment for communication with my child?

Creating a friendly atmosphere for talking to children does not happen by chance. Adults need to pay careful attention to children as part of daily interactions.

- Greet your children and address them by name.
- Invite them to talk with you about their day.
- Speak courteously to your children.
- Listen attentively — set aside your tasks for awhile.



### Summary

Take time to talk with your children and share the joys and sorrows you experience. Using techniques of communication and accepting each other's feelings will build parent-child relationships.

### If you would like to read more.....

Faber, Adel, & Mazlish, Elaine; "How To Talk So Kids will Listen, and Listen So Kids Will Talk," Avon, New York, 1980.

Goddard, H. Wallace; "Principles of Parenting," Alabama Cooperative Extension Service, Auburn University, Alabama, 1993.

Gordon, Thomas; "Parent Effectiveness Training," Weyden Publishers, New York, 1975.

Hamner, Tommie, & Turner, Pauline; "Parenting in Contemporary Society," Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1990.

---

*"Working with the Young Child: Ages 4-8" is a series of six bulletins authored by Arizona Cooperative Extension Family Task Force members. The bulletins cover the same major topics found in "Understanding Youth: Working with the Early Adolescent" curriculum, but address younger children.*