

# FamilyTALK: Making it Work

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., Family Systems Specialist, K-State Research and Extension

Kristy Archuleta, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Kansas State University



Most of you rarely think about how you communicate with loved ones. However, family communication is important: It determines relationships with each other and sets the tone for family living. Family communication is **not** simple. Communication is more than what you say and do. Your messages depend on how you think the other person will react, so you may communicate differently with each member of the family. Each person has several different family communication patterns that develop over time, depending on who is being communicated with, the setting, the timing, and other factors.

## How You Communicate

You have something you want to share when you communicate with another family member. Using words is the most common way to express thoughts and feelings, but you also send nonverbal messages with your eyes, facial expressions, and body movements. Have you ever known anyone in your family to stomp out of the room without saying a word? That is a nonverbal message.

Another important part of communication is listening. A good listener sends a nonverbal message of care and concern even if he or she does not agree with the message being sent. Thoughtful listening builds relationships.

Conflicts happen when family members do not agree with each other. That is normal because no two people are likely to get along all the time. It takes time and effective communication skills to work through these differences. Treating each other with respect even when you are mad at each other is very important. That means no name calling, put downs, or insults. How you treat each other in conflict shows how much you value your relationship. Family members can learn many communication skills that help in getting along with each other.

## Communication Examples

### A word with two meanings:

When Enrique and Sue were first married, Enrique said he wanted to have a large family. Sue thought he meant three children, but Enrique meant at least six. They each had a different meaning for the word large. Enrique and Sue avoided an argument by taking the time to listen to each other. It helped them understand they were using the same word to mean two different things.

### A difficult situation:

Brittney and Chris both have children from previous marriages. They always have problems around the winter holidays working out visitation schedules with other family members. Brittney wants to start discussing visitations early. She brings up the topic, but Chris is not in the mood to talk about it. He gets up and walks out of the room. She follows him and continues to talk about the issue. The more he refuses to talk, the more

she pursues the topic. Finally they both explode. Later they regret what they said to each other. To protect their relationship, they have work to do in learning new ways to communicate with each other.

## Building Your Family Communication Skills

- Think about typical interactions among your family members, including grandparents and other relatives. Review both the happy times as well as the problem times. It helps to think how you can increase the happy times while changing the times you clash with each other. It is easy to think that the other family member should change. Look seriously at yourself first to see what type of communication patterns you are using — you have the most control over yourself in changing family interactions.
- You can get carried away by thinking bad things about others when there is a great deal of conflict. Stop yourself when negative feelings and thoughts about other family members overwhelm positive thoughts. Talk to yourself about the good qualities of other family members. Think about the good times you have had together. Self-talk is powerful for influencing your feelings and actions.
- Communication with family members involves talking, but listening is also important.
- Effective listening is one of the best ways to show you care for the other person. Effective listening builds trust, but takes patience and hard work. This type of listening is more than hearing just the spoken word. It allows you to understand what is actually said.
- A family member can tell when you are listening by noticing your eyes, facial expressions, and body movements. Part of listening may be as simple as saying, “Yes,” or “I see,” or nodding your head. Remember that family members sometimes want a listening ear without advice or judgment. Think about body language. What message are you sending? Are you fidgeting? Rolling your eyes? Smiling sarcastically? Think about your body position. Are you facing the speaker without being too close or too far away? Are you sending a message that you are truly listening?
- Effective listening does not mean you agree. You may not like what the other person says. You are just trying to understand and identify with the other person’s message. You may need to ask questions to get the correct meaning of the intended message.
- One way to show you understand is to use your own words to repeat the main points the other person has communicated. It is helpful to try to identify the speaker’s feelings during this process. If you are not correct in understanding the speaker’s emotions and message, you need to repeat the process until the other person is satisfied that you understand. Effective communication during a disagreement happens when each person gets a chance to be listened to without interruption and works hard at voicing feelings and the impact of the given situation without blaming.



- Communication built on trust helps family members survive all kinds of tough times. You know you can depend on each other. Having trust also means that the communication patterns you use all the time show care and respect for each other. You may not always agree, but each of you has confidence that everyone will talk with respect, even when angry. Family members stop themselves from using insults and name calling to hurt each other.
- Big problems can seem overwhelming at times. They are easier to deal with when you break them down into the following parts. 1) Get your emotions under control. Effective communication is hard when a person is angry. 2) Stop and clearly define one part of the problem with other family members that are involved in the situation. This is often the hardest part of problem solving. If you are angry at a family member, define one specific behavior without exaggerating your feelings or bringing up the past. If the problem is beyond the family's control, such as a parent losing employment, identify one part of the problem at a time. An example may be getting transportation to find a new job. 3) After you have clearly defined one part of the problem, brainstorm creative solutions. Try hard to welcome all suggestions. If you begin to say, "No, that won't work," other family members may stop thinking creatively. 4) Think about the pros and cons for each solution. 5) Decide on a course of action that is agreeable to all involved. 6) Do what the family has decided. 7) Determine after a period of time if it is working. If it is not, start the problem-solving process again.
- Families that enjoy each other build strong family relationships. Often a family will find it hard to have fun and enjoy each other when they are fighting all the time. Time spent playing together provides a relaxed way for family members to bond with each other. This helps reduce arguments. When family members are having fun, they are calmer and behave more naturally. Having fun can be especially helpful for families who are struggling financially or are suffering other severe stresses. Good times build powerful memories.
- You often think you cannot stop and make time for fun with your busy lives, but fun can come in simple and everyday ways. Daily conversation provides an easy way to increase family fun. Try giving compliments, showing appreciation, and talking over pleasant things that happened during the day. Playful silliness can be nourishing, too. Doing helpful things for others also can be fun. For example, one family rakes leaves for their elderly neighbor each fall. A family may have to establish some ground rules when they are planning a fun event. This will help avoid arguments that can ruin a family's attempt to have fun.
- For more comprehensive information on family communication, contact your local family and consumer sciences agent or go to the website: [www.ksre.ksu.edu/families](http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/families).



## Authors

Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., Family Systems Specialist, K-State Research and Extension; Professor, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University

Kristy Archuleta, Ph.D., L.M.F.T., Assistant Professor, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University

## Reviewers

Charles A. Smith, Child Development Specialist, K-State Research and Extension; Professor, School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University

Anna Mae Brown, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent, K-State Research and Extension – Wildcat District

Paula Seele, K-State Research and Extension

## References:

DeFrain, J., & University of Nebraska-Lincoln For Families Writing Team (2006). *Family treasures: Creating strong families*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension.

Gottman, J. M., and DeClaire, J. (2001). *The relationship cure: A five-step guide for building better connections with family, friends, and lovers*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Markman, H. J., Stanley, S. M., and Blumberg, S. L. (2010). *Fighting for your marriage* (3rd edition). San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

McFarland, M., Betts, S., Walker, J., Mancini, J., Goggin, S., Huebner, A., and Bonner, L. (1999). *Moving ahead: Preparing the youth development professional*. Manhattan, KS: USDA/Army School-Age and Teen Project.

Olsen, C. S. (2001). *Basic family communication* (Publication No. S-134e). Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University Agricultural Experimental Station and Cooperative Extension Service.

Rosenberg, M. B. (2003). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life* (2nd ed.). Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press.

Smith, C. A. (1999). *The basic parenting program: A handbook for program leaders*. Manhattan, KS: Kansas State University Agricultural Experimental Station and Cooperative Extension Service.

Smith, C. A., and Olsen C. S. (Sept., 2010). *Appreciation: Making your family stronger*. FSHS Update. Manhattan, KS: School of Family Studies and Human Services Extension.

Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied of similar products not mentioned. Publications from Kansas State University are available at: [www.ksre.ksu.edu](http://www.ksre.ksu.edu)

Publications are reviewed or revised annually by appropriate faculty to reflect current research and practice. Date shown is that of publication or last revision. Contents of this publication may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. All other rights reserved.

In each case, credit Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Ph.D., and Kristy Archuleta, Ph.D., *FamilyTALK: Making it Work, Fact Sheet*, Kansas State University, August 2011.



Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service

MF2995

August 2011

K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, as amended. Kansas State University, County Extension Councils, Extension Districts, and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating, Gary Pierzynski, Interim Director.