

4-H Volunteer Leaders' Series

# Communication Is the Key

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The ability to effectively communicate with other people is a valuable life skill. Through communication people reach some understanding of each other, learn to like each other, influence one another, build trust, and learn more about themselves and how people perceive them. Through communication people learn to understand others as persons or vice versa. People who communicate effectively know how to interact with others flexibly, skillfully and responsibly but without sacrificing their own needs and integrity. They are aware of how others affect them and the effect of their behaviors on others. They can assume responsibility for their actions.

interprets the message in the same way that the person who sent the message intended it. Failures in communication happen when the receiver understands the meaning of a message differently than it was intended. There are some specific skills that can be learned to facilitate effective communication. As a receiver, one can learn to listen accurately and also learn how to reflect back to the sender the message that is heard. As a sender, one can improve skills in sending clear, accurate and specific messages.

## People Communicate Verbally and Nonverbally

When people interact, they communicate through an exchange of messages. These messages are composed of verbal and nonverbal cues. In communication, not only what is said but how it is said is important. The sound of the voice, the facial expression and the posture carry a message. For example, if you are talking to a person whose face and fists are clenched but who insists he/she is very happy and carefree, you are apt to feel confused. People may try to hide feelings in verbal expressions which are more obvious in their nonverbal expressions. For real communication to occur, the verbal and nonverbal expressions must agree. In other words, what you say should agree with your facial expressions, posture and voice tone – if clear communication is your goal.

## Why Is Communication So Important?

The process of verbal interaction is important in maintaining one's health and well-being. By discussing our experiences with each other, we provide opportunities for sorting out our often complex and confusing lives. When we share our experiences and feelings sincerely, we come to realize that all of us experience emotions, but that each of us experiences them in his/her own way. Thus, by sharing our experiences and the feelings that go along with them, we can recognize the similarities among human beings as well as the individual differences.

Effective communication exists between two persons when the person for whom a message is intended



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## Sometimes Communication Fails

Many factors contribute to communication failures. For example, a person may be preoccupied and not able to listen to what others have to say. Or, a person can be so interested in communicating his/her own message and formulating a response that he/she listens to others only to find an opening to communicate his/her own message. Sometimes individuals listen in order to evaluate and make judgments about the speaker. The speaker may then become defensive and end the interaction. Finally, a lack of trust may be a cause of communication distortion. In a group or between two people, distrust can cause a reduction in the information that is shared and a suspicion concerning the information being communicated. When trust is high, there tends to be a greater level of understanding.

## Listening to Youth

4-H means working with youth. But, before we can work with them, we have to get to know them. Simple? No!

Many youth workers today are saying that they are really having trouble relating to youth. It seems appropriate then to suggest that 4-H volunteers practice some skills in getting to know and in relating to youth – among these skills the most important are:

1. Listening well.
2. Responding so that youth feel understood and accepted.
3. Listening long enough and patiently enough.
4. Listening not only to the sounds of words but also thinking about the meaning.
5. Listening carefully all the time not only when it is convenient to our needs or time frames.
6. Listening to the words and the feelings behind them.
7. Listening with our ears and not forgetting that our eyes can tell us a lot about what another person is saying.
8. Listening to what the person is saying rather than preparing what we are going to say next.
9. Keeping an open mind and not making judgments about the person who is talking and either stop listening or discount what is being said.

## How to Become a Better Listener

Here are some specific suggestions for you to practice if you sincerely want to improve your listening skills. Your practice, however, must be continuous, not just whenever you happen to think about it. Only you can improve your listening skills. No one else can “practice” for you. Listening, like any other skill, can be taught and learned. As with speaking, singing, bowling, golfing, skiing, etc., to read about it in advance may help you, but it is the actual practice that will perfect your skill.

1. **Stop talking** – You can't listen when you talk.
2. **One conversation at a time** – You may hear two people at one time, but you can't effectively listen to two conversations at once.
3. **Ask questions** – When you don't understand, ask questions.
4. **Don't interrupt** – Give the person time to say what he/she has to say. Then, not before, ask the questions.
5. **Concentrate on what the person is saying** – Actively focus your attention on the words, the ideas and the feelings related to the subject.
6. **Don't jump to conclusions** – When you do, you tune yourself out from the rest of what the speaker has to say either by thinking to yourself, “Hurry up and finish I've got your point” or by “Yes, Yes, I know what you mean.”
7. **Avoid distractions** – Concentrate on the speaker and what he/she is saying.
8. **Don't argue mentally** – When you do this, you may still hear, but you've stopped listening. Instead you are mentally divorced from what is being said while you are formulating your rebuttal to the remarks.
9. **Get the main points** – Concentrate on the main ideas and not the illustrative material.
10. **React to ideas, not to the speaker** – Don't allow your reactions to the speaker influence your interpretation of what he/she says. The ideas may be good even if you don't like the person or like the way the person looks.
11. **Listen to what is NOT said** – Sometimes you can learn just as much by determining what the other person leaves out or avoids saying as you can by listening to what he/she actually says.

12. **Listen to HOW something is said** – We frequently concentrate so hard on what is said that we miss the importance of the emotional reactions and attitudes related to what is said.
13. **Don't make assumptions** – Don't assume that the speaker uses words the same way you do; that he/she didn't say what was meant, but that you understand what was meant.
14. **Evaluate facts and evidence** – As you listen, try to identify not only the significance of the facts and the evidence, but also how they relate to the point the speaker is trying to make.
15. **Share the responsibility for communication** – Only part of the responsibility for effective communication rests with the speaker. You, as the listener, have an equal responsibility. Try to understand, and if you don't, ask for clarification.

## You Can Facilitate Effective Communication

Adults can foster effective communication with youth by promoting trust and modeling communication skills. Adults can demonstrate listening skills in everyday interaction and by using activities during club meetings that are designed to increase communication skills in the group.

For examples of communication activities, refer to "Leadership Life Skills, Leader/Agent's Guide," "Helping 4-H'ers Learn Leadership, Helper's Guide" and "Exploring 4-H Leadership, Members Guide." These materials are available through your county Extension office.

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