ADULTS SAVING KIDS

Founded by Alvin Erickson

Skill 1

Communication

Teach children to talk.

Creating a Home Where Hard Things Can Be Talked About

Why Communication Is Protective

Parents often believe communication means talking to their children, but in reality, protective communication means children are willing to talk to you. When children do not have a safe place to bring confusion, fear, curiosity, or shame, they do not stop needing answers—they simply look elsewhere, and the people who step in may not have the child's best interest at heart.

> *While healthy communication does not prevent every mistake, it dramatically reduces isolation, secrecy, and vulnerability.*

What Often Goes Wrong

Many parents unintentionally shut down communication by reacting too strongly when a child finally speaks up. Common negative patterns include immediate lecturing, panic or anger, moralizing too quickly, or issuing punishments for honesty. Children learn fast; if telling the truth leads to trouble, they stop telling it altogether. Another common mistake is waiting too long to talk under the assumption that certain topics will naturally "come later." By the time parents finally bring them up, children may have already formed their ideas from peers, media, or the internet.

What Healthy Communication Really Is

Healthy communication is not oversharing, dumping adult anxiety onto children, or giving too much information too soon. Instead, healthy communication consists of age-appropriate honesty, genuine curiosity about what your child thinks, calm listening, and ongoing conversations rather than one single "big talk." Communication ultimately works best when it feels normal rather than dramatic.

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One Rule Parents Must Remember

THE ONE RULE

Never punish honesty.

This does not mean there are no consequences for behavior; it simply means telling the truth must always be met with respect first. You can respond with reassurance by saying, *"Thank you for telling me," "That took courage,"* or *"Let's think about this together."* Then—and only then—should you address the underlying behavior or safety concerns.

Real-Life Examples

EXAMPLE 1

Young Child (Ages 4–7)

If a young child says, "A kid at school showed me something weird on his phone," an unhelpful response would be to react with alarm: "What?! Who was it? That's horrible!" A helpful response keeps the child talking without shutting them down: "Thank you for telling me. What did you see?" The goal is always to keep the dialogue open rather than leading with panic.

EXAMPLE 2

Elementary / Preteen

When a preteen says, "My friend says everyone is doing this," avoid arguing facts right away. Instead of launching into a lecture, ask questions like, "How did that make you feel?" or "What do you think about it?" Children need guided support sorting through their own thoughts rather than having their thoughts immediately replaced.

EXAMPLE 3

Teen

When a teenager defensively claims, "You wouldn't understand," a powerful and grounding response is simply: "You might be right—but I want to try." That single statement alone can reopen doors that felt previously locked.

Starting Conversations Early (and Why It Matters)

> *Building open communication early, when children are young, helps establish trust that can carry into the teenage years.*

Conversations should begin long before middle school using simple language to address bodies, friendships, fairness, manipulation, and right vs. wrong. Waiting until adolescence makes these discussions feel sudden, awkward, and suspicious.

For instance, imagine an eight-year-old asking a question about his body that catches a parent completely off guard. Internally, the parent may feel embarrassed and unprepared, but by remaining calm, answering honestly, and avoiding making the child feel ashamed, the parent teaches a vital lesson. The specific answer matters, but the larger takeaway is what the child internalizes: "I can talk to my parent about difficult things." Years later, that underlying trust may be far more important than the original answer given.

Practical Communication Habits

To build strong habits, parents should use natural, low-pressure moments like car rides, bedtime, walks, or the immediate time after school. Side-by-side conversations often work best because eye contact becomes optional. When speaking, rely on open-ended questions—such as "What do kids say about that?", "What have you heard?", or "What do you think about it?"—to avoid standard yes/no traps. Additionally, learn to admit when you don't know something. Saying "I don't know" models humility and honesty, which can then be naturally followed up with, "Let's find out together."

What Communication Is Not

It is vital to remember that healthy communication is not control, interrogation, or moral lecturing.

> *If children feel examined, they instinctively retreat; if they feel respected, they actively engage.*

Age-Appropriate Guidance

Communication needs to evolve naturally over time: young children require short answers and ongoing reassurance; elementary-aged children benefit from simple explanations tied to family values; and teens need active dialogue rather than speeches. As children grow, parent-child communication naturally shifts from direct instruction to mutual collaboration.

Common Mistakes Parents Make

Parents often fall into predictable traps: talking too much, correcting too quickly, reacting emotionally, or waiting indefinitely for the "perfect time."

> *In reality, there is no perfect time; there is only now.*

One Guiding Principle

> GUIDING PRINCIPLE
>
> **If your child brings something to you, treat it as a gift—even if it is difficult to hear.**
>
> That fragile moment represents active trust.

Biblical Wisdom

James 1:19 reminds us that *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,"* which speaks directly to the parent's role. Similarly, Proverbs 20:5 notes that *"The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out,"* which speaks directly to the child's heart.

> *Together, these two scriptures form a complete parenting philosophy: listen first, and draw out what is hidden.*

Practical Wisdom & Application

When most people hear James 1:19, they focus on general patience or controlling their temper. But imagine a parent applying that principle when a child admits a mistake, shares something disturbing they saw online, says "You wouldn't understand," or reveals something frightening. In every scenario, the initial instruction remains the same: listen first. The goal is not to have the perfect immediate answer, but to keep the conversation open.

Combining this with Proverbs 20:5 acknowledges that children often struggle to explain what they are feeling inside. Wise parents learn to draw out those deep waters. Instead of asking an accusatory "Why did you do that?", try saying "Tell me more." Instead of immediately declaring "That's a bad idea," ask "What do you think will happen?" By drawing out what is hidden rather than rushing to correct, you show that communication isn't about having all the right answers—

it is about listening well enough that children feel safe bringing their questions, mistakes, fears, and struggles directly to you.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

Communication is ultimately not about having the right words; it is about creating a climate where children dare to speak.

When parents become safe listeners, children are far less likely to become isolated—and isolation is precisely where harm grows.

THIS WEEK

One Thing to Try This Week

To put this into practice, choose one simple approach this week.

- You might try asking a better question after school—replacing "Did you have a good day?" with open-ended prompts like "What was the most interesting thing that happened today?", "What was the best part of your day?", "What was the weirdest thing you saw today?", or "What is something kids at school are talking about?"
- Alternatively, you can create a dedicated 10-minute conversation window during a car ride, at bedtime, or on a walk with no teaching, no correcting, and pure listening.
- Finally, you can practice the simple phrase "Tell me more" the next time your child shares something unexpected, resisting the urge to fix it right away and observing what unfolds.

Wisdom Principle: Listen first.

Scripture Acknowledgment

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