



# Communication skills for educators

As an educator, communication skills are an important requirement of your job. Effective communication with children, young people and families means that if issues come up, families and educators are able to share information, respond early and consistently, and seek additional support if required.

## How does good communication help?

Effective communication benefits everyone, but it's especially important when thinking about mental health and wellbeing.

**When you communicate effectively, you build a shared understanding and a partnership with the other person.**

This has benefits for everyone. Here are just a few.

- **Improved relationships:** Honest, respectful communication builds trust, which, in turn, allows people to be open about their thoughts and feelings.
- **A better understanding of what's happening at home:** If there's an issue, you're well placed to learn how it might affect the child or young person, how a young person or family would like

you to manage the issue, or what supports might be helpful and appropriate.

- **Families understand the learning environment:** Families are better able to understand the child or young person's strengths and can work with you to address any challenges.
- **You model positive social interactions:** This is an important part of children and young people's social development.

## Communication barriers

Some things to consider when you're communicating include:

- **Timing:** Do I have the time to give this person my full attention? If not, you could say, "I only have five minutes right now, but could we meet at..." This lets the person know the conversation is important, even if you can't attend to it right away.

- **Environment:** Is this a good place to have this conversation? Consider privacy.
- **Your feelings:** Consider how you might be feeling about what's been said. When you're emotional, you're more likely to misread the other person or respond hastily.
- **Family background:** Culture, personal values and beliefs that may be different to your own can affect communication.
- **Distractions:** You can't communicate effectively when you're multitasking. If you're distracted, you're likely to miss non-verbal cues. Try to avoid distractions and stay focused.
- **Different agendas:** Listen to what the other person wants to discuss and try not to be distracted by what you think is most important.
- **Dismissing:** Don't be reassuring when there may not be a positive outcome (for example, by saying "You'll be fine").
- **Judging:** You don't have to agree with someone else's views, but you do need to set aside your own judgment, blame or criticism to fully understand their point of view.

## Key communication skills for educators

Communication skills are easy to learn – they just require practice. Skills include:

### Information-sharing

This helps everyone in the learning community to:

- be aware of a child or young person's strengths and challenges
- develop a common understanding
- work together to support all individuals' wellbeing and development
- support one another.

Information that may be helpful to communicate includes:

- the child or young person's interests, strengths and challenging behaviours
- social supports outside the early learning service or school

- developmentally appropriate and expected behaviours
- family expectations and circumstances
- the learning community's expectations and practices.

### Non-verbal communication

This can be written or electronic (such as emails). It can also include people's body language, tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions during face-to-face conversations. We sometimes rely on non-verbal communication more than words to convey meaning and understanding throughout a conversation. This is especially so when trying to communicate complex feelings, ideas and concepts.

### Empathy

Empathy shows the other person you understand their perspective without passing judgment. It communicates respect and acceptance, which helps to build trust. It doesn't mean you have to agree with each other, but it means being able to respect and accept differences.

Ways to be empathetic toward others include:

- showing respect for other people's point of view, even when you don't agree
- having a sense of goodwill or kindness
- valuing the experience, knowledge and commitment others bring to a partnership
- being aware of the difficulties and challenges others face.

### Active listening

To listen to someone properly, you need to tune in and give them your full attention. Active listening involves:

1. **Attending:** Create a comfortable space for the conversation, make appropriate eye contact and use attentive body language such as nodding, leaning forward and smiling. You can use minimal acknowledgers, such as 'mm' and 'uh-huh', which encourage people to continue speaking and are very effective in helping the speaker feel that you're interested in what they're saying.

2. **Following:** It's important to keep the conversation going. You can use open and closed questions, encouraging body language or verbal sounds and clarifying queries. These prompts show you're engaged with what's being said, without interrupting the flow of the speaker. Open questions encourage more detailed responses, rather than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. For example, "What are your concerns about your child?" or "Tell me how it happened?"
3. **Pauses and silences:** Pausing encourages the other person to continue talking, and silences are useful when they're still thinking about what's been said. A person might open up more when you resist the temptation to fill a silence.
4. **Reflecting:** Put what the other person has said into your own words to show them you're listening, and that you understand what they mean. This involves rephrasing what you've heard, and reflecting the feeling of what someone's saying or showing through their body language. Reflection shows you have empathy for their situation. It also builds trust and can prevent misunderstandings. After you reflect back to someone what you've heard, they can confirm the accuracy of your impression, or correct it.
5. **Prioritising:** Focusing a conversation on the main content helps ensure the most pressing needs are discussed. For example, say "I can hear that there is a lot going on for you right now. Can you tell me what the most urgent issue is for you right now, so we can focus on that?"

## Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about how to have conversations with children and young people about their wellbeing the module [Inquire](#).

## External links

Australia Institute of Family Studies – [Talking about parenting: Why a radical communications shift is needed to drive better outcomes for children](#)

headspace – [5 ways to effectively communicate your feelings](#)

ReachOut – [3 steps to better communication](#) / [How to have difficult conversations](#)