

KHN Adult Education/Bagel U.
Parent Education and Support Group: A 3-Part Series
Session One: Parent-Child Communication

Introduction

This three-session parent training program covers the following subjects:

Session 1. Parent-Child Communication--introducing the basics of “talking so your kids will listen and listening so your kids will talk;” using Active Listening and I-Messages to improve communication. The first session will begin with an introduction to Attachment Theory.

Session 2. Positive Discipline/Behavior Management--defining “positive discipline” and examining the downsides of punishment; reviewing basic learning principles; establishing rules, limits, and routines appropriate for your child and family; and using a “logical consequences” approach to help children learn responsible and acceptable behavior.

Session 3. Problem-Solving Interventions to Improve Self-Regulation of Emotions and Behavior--introducing the basics of problem solving; presenting an orientation to “emotion coaching;” using a problem-solving approach to resolve time out or suspension of privileges; and intervening when there has been extreme emotional breakdown.

This series is titled a “parent education *and support group*” because, for each 90-minute session, the didactic portion will be limited to 45 minutes and 45 minutes will be devoted to discussion. Parents will have the opportunity to share their own experiences and concerns regarding family life in an atmosphere of mutual support.

The Importance of Attachment

Before exploring the first topic area, I would like to share a general orientation that underlies all three of our topics, namely that of attachment theory. Indeed, the concepts of attachment provide the foundation for an understanding of parenting, family life and human development in the broadest sense. What follows is a brief primer on attachment theory so we can have a shared conceptual framework as we address the topics in this series.

Attachment theory is concerned with the effect of attachments, or affectional bonds between human beings, in development and functioning.

- Human beings are innately preprogrammed to seek and form attachments with others for the purpose of protection and survival.

- Attachment theory postulates that the attachment system is a unique motivational and behavioral system regulating the formation of close relationships.
- Behavioral systems are seen as control systems designed to achieve a specified end, activated in certain conditions and terminated in others.
- In a plurality of behavioral systems, the attachment system is similar to but has a separate function from other biologically rooted behavioral systems, such as sexual behavior (for the purpose of reproduction), feeding (for nutrition) and exploring (knowledge of the environment).

Attachment behavior is any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or maintaining proximity to some other clearly identified individual who is conceived as better able to cope with the world.

- Attachment behavior has the evolutionary significance of protection by activating caregiving responses and maintaining proximity with the caregiver.
- Attachment also has evolutionary significance by creating feelings of security that allow the person to explore the environment.

The attachment behavioral system is activated when the parental figure is or appears to be inaccessible, or when the child feels pain, fatigue, or fear, etc.

- The attachment behavior is terminated when the attachment distress is assuaged by comforting and caregiving.
- With low intensity arousal, the sight or sound of the attachment figure may be sufficient to calm the attachment seeking behavior.
- If the child is highly distressed or anxious, prolonged cuddling may be required to restore calm.

Attachment and caregiving are interrelated and complementary systems.

- The caregiving behavioral system is to some degree preprogrammed and ready to develop along certain lines when conditions elicit it.
- The parent experiences a strong urge to soothe, cradle, protect and feed the baby.

The capacity to make intimate emotional bonds with other individuals is “a principle feature of effective personality functioning and mental health.” (Bowlby, 1988)

- Infants and young children have an innate need for “joyful dialogic companionship” with the attachment figure.
- Secure attachment in the early years is important to the development of healthy social, emotional and cognitive functioning.
- Secure attachment acts as a buffer against stress and leads to more effective exploratory behavior, which in turn facilitates more adaptive responses to the environment.

- Proximity to a loved one “tranquilizes the nervous system” (Johnson, 2004), a natural antidote to the anxieties and vulnerabilities of life.
- Primary experiences of comfort and joy help grow connections in the brain between the limbic emotional brain and the pre-frontal cortex.
- Attachment security is crucial for many areas of optimal brain development in children that promote affect regulation, social cognition, self-awareness and fear modulation.

Attachment behavior is accompanied by intense emotion regardless of age.

- If the attachment relationship is going well, the person experiences joy and a sense of security.
- If the attachment relationship is threatened, it arouses jealousy, anxiety and anger.
- If the attachment relationship is broken or lost, the person experiences grief and depression.
- If attachment behaviors fail to provoke responsiveness from the attachment figure, it leads to separation distress and a sequence of responses: angry protest, clinging, depression/despair, and detachment.

Internal Working Models: A Key Assumption of Attachment Theory

From repeated interactions with attachment figures, an internalized set of beliefs develop. These representational schema are especially activated during periods of stress.

Model of Self: The person develops an internalized sense of his or her a) degree of worthiness of love and care, and b) degree of competence in dealing with the environment.

Model of the Other: The person develops an internalized sense of expectations for the availability and responsiveness of attachment figures.

Model of the Relationship: The person internalizes rules and strategies for interpreting and regulating attachment-related information and behavior in close relationships.

Working models develop from real-life experiences with attachment figures. Internal appraisals led to behaviors that were adaptive at the time in the person’s earlier development.

- Early attachment relationships, through internal working models, form a template that influences later relationships.
- Internal working models may act as a lens that distorts current attachment-related information.

- Feelings and actions that were appropriate to the earlier situation may not be appropriate to the present, but they may persist due to the effect of working models that are resistant to change.
- Working models are also resistant to change because they operate in automatic ways outside of awareness.

Types of Attachment Styles in Children

Secure Attachment

- The caregiver is accessible and responsive.
- The internal model of self is one of being worthy and competent.
- The internal model of others is one of being responsive and dependable.
- Secure attachment leads to greater emotional self-regulation in problem solving.
- Securely attached children make more use of adult support in appropriate ways.
- They have more empathic and cooperative relationships with adults and peers, and tend to have fewer behavior problems.

Anxious Attachment

- The caregiver is inconsistently responsive and helpful when needed.
- The internal model of self is one of being uncertain and fearful.
- The internal model of others is one of being potentially affirming yet unreliable.
- Anxious attachment leads to clinging and pursuit, aggressive attempts to control the behavior of the attachment figure, and preoccupation and hypervigilance about attachment-related information.
- Confidence and motivation for exploration and mastery is conditional on the presence, support, and approval of attachment figures.
- Dependency on the caregiver slows development of affective self-regulation and leaves the person vulnerable to stress and emotional ups and downs.
- Anxious attachment results in an obsession with one's own attachment issues and to fears of being overwhelmed with negative emotions.

Avoidant Attachment

- The caregiver is unresponsive and rejects the child's efforts to solicit protection, support and caring; hope of responsiveness is lost.
- The internal model of self is one of being alone and unwanted.
- The internal model of others is one of being rejecting and untrustworthy.
- Attachment seeking behaviors are "deactivated" due to unresponsiveness or relationship conditions.
- The child takes a stance of "compulsive self-sufficiency," does not seek out adults when injured or distressed, and reliance on others is low.

- Avoidant attachment is associated with antisocial behavior, and hostile and distant relationships.
- Signals that normally activate attachment behavior fail to do so, and attachment behavior may be temporarily or permanently incapable of being activated.
- The range of feeling that accompanies attachment is also incapable of being aroused; the person is no longer capable of experiencing being loved or having loving feelings.
- People with avoidant attachment desire low intensity relationships and use distancing coping strategies.
- They manage anxiety by inattention to affect and restriction of emotional life.

Developing an Attachment Theory Perspective

Parents or parent figures provide a secure base from which the child or adolescent can venture into the world and to which he can return, knowing he will be welcomed, nourished physically and emotionally, comforted if distressed, and reassured if frightened.

- The child wants to know: Are you there for me? Do I matter to you?
- For all ages, positive attachments create a safe haven that provides a buffer against stress and uncertainty and an optimal context for the continuing development of the person.

Disconnection hurts--we need loving contact like we need oxygen.

- Emotional isolation is traumatizing. We are not designed for self-sufficiency; we are born to connect.
- Rejection is a danger cue, processed in the brain like pain.

Dependence traditionally has been seen as inevitable in young children, but stigmatized as “regressive” in later years, with no biological value attributed to it.

- The pinnacle of development was portrayed in earlier theories as the independent, self-sufficient individual.
- We want “efficient positive dependency”--dependency makes us stronger.
- We have given dependency a bad rap!

Healthy parenting means being available, ready to respond when needed for encouragement or assistance.

- If the child is confident the attachment figure will be there when needed, caring and responsive, the child becomes more and more capable of regulation of affect while involved in exploration and more confident in his or her ability to master difficulties that may arise.

- Bowlby taught us that timely and appropriate close bodily contact does not “spoil” babies, making them fussy and clingy--just the opposite.
- Attachment theory turns the old Darwinian adage on its head: “Survival of the most nurtured.”

Attachment theory does not presume to address or explain all aspects of personality development.

- In-born temperament, heredity and learning experiences explain much about human functioning and personality.
- Attachment theory focuses on helping us understand intimate interpersonal relationships.

Parent-Child Communication

The Importance of Communication:

- Communication, verbal and nonverbal, is the means by which we create connections with our children and build bonds of attachment.
- Communication is also the way children learn who they are and establish a sense of their own worth, capabilities, and acceptability.
- Through communication, parents help their children develop a secure base from which to explore the world, an optimistic sense of what to expect from others, and confidence in their ability to deal effectively with their environment.
- Being listened to creates a sense of being understandable and worthwhile. Not being listened to fosters insecurity.
- Communication is the key to the development of self-understanding as well as social understanding.
- Attachment security is built with parental attunement and sensitivity to the child’s experience, feelings and needs.
- The need for attuned communication persists throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

Ingredients for Healthy Communication

Empathy

Empathy = Understanding Plus Acceptance

- Children need to feel understood and accepted.

A parent’s general stance toward a child should be one of “empathic mirroring.”

- Demonstrate appreciation.

- Use admiring attention, acceptance, and affection.
- Offer affirmations of your child as a lovable and capable person--without them having to perform, conform, agree, or please you to get your approval and love.

Attuned communication from the parent about what the child is experiencing, especially by matching the child's affective expression, helps the child regulate her emotions through a process called **co-regulation**.

Attention and Interest

Quality of time is important. Quantity of time is important.

Listen. Ask. Try to "follow" (your child's agenda) more and "lead" (by shifting to your own agenda) less when communicating with your child.

Showing interest in what the child is interested in and excited about is a great way to improve self-esteem, even better than using praise (though lots of that is great). Indulge and validate their interests because their interests express who they are.

Respect and Safety

Use respectful language, such as please and thank you, and try to use a respectful and controlled tone of voice.

Accept that your children are separate people. Allow them to differentiate, have their own wishes, their own interests, and their own feelings. Delight in the specialness of who they are.

Allow children to have a voice and, where possible, a choice in matters that affect them. Some decisions should be left to children--in other decisions, children should have a voice but not a choice.

Concentrate on listening to children and relax attempts to control, reform, manipulate and improve them.

Avoid put-downs, shaming, and humiliation. Avoid negative labeling of the child's character. Keep the focus on the requirements of the current situation and on your own feelings.

The parent communicates that the child's inner life is safe with her; it will not be judged. We are curious to know the child and understand their inner experience.

Distinguish Between Feelings and Behavior

Accept the feeling; limit or correct the behavior as needed.

The child's feelings, impulses, needs, and wishes are OK. These are the child's inner experiences and can never be "wrong."

Parents who are comfortably "in charge" and feel confident in their parental authority usually feel more comfortable accepting their child's inner experience. In this way, setting limits and enforcing rules permits and facilitates empathy.

Sometimes when children feel heard and understood they find it easier to accept not getting what they want.

When children receive the message that their feelings or impulses are "wrong" or "bad," they may begin to cut themselves off from parts of their own experience in order to keep the parent's love and acceptance. Or they begin to share less and less of their "unacceptable" inner experience with their parents.

Optimal Communication is Reciprocal

The parent will have the best influence on the child when the child is able to have an influence on the parent.

Ideally, communication involves an *intersubjective* process, influencing and being influenced in safe and healthy relationships.

- We are open to and engaged with the experience of each other.
- Through sharing their experiences, the inner lives of both child and parent are being deepened, expanded and organized into more coherent selves.
- Children need to feel safe in connection for this intense emotional relationship to occur.

The Importance of Repair

The heart of attachment is repair--"our relationship is bigger than the conflict."

There are inevitable and unavoidable breaks in the close connection between parent and child.

- A conflict or upsetting event may cause a break in the relationship, for example, the parent may get very angry and speak harshly, or the child may get furious about being denied a privilege.
- Communication is shut down and connection is disrupted.
- When breaks occur, the parent goes into *relationship repair* mode.
- The parent facilitates a restoration of the close connection and re-establishes communication with the child.

- The sense of safety is restored when the parent actively facilitates repair ASAP.

The two skill development portions of our session that are presented next may figure prominently in a parent's efforts at relationship repair.

“Good-Enough Parenting”

No-one has perfect attunement to their child's feelings and experience.

- You don't even want perfect attunement (but you don't want chronic misattunement either).
- The child can learn to tolerate a range of responsiveness.
- When you have “good-enough” attunement to your child's needs and feelings, the child experiences life as okay, safe and secure, and they know that wonderful things can happen.

Active Listening

Active listening is a tool we use to ***put empathy into action***. Active listening has also been called “reflective listening,” “reflection of feelings.” or “mirroring.”

When should active listening be used?

- When the child expresses strong feelings.
- When the parent wants to explore and understand the child's thoughts and feelings.

Active listening “opens the doors of communication,” rolls out a red carpet and invites the child to walk in. Successful active listening usually results in the child going deeper into sharing and exploring her feelings.

In active listening, the receiver/listener (parent) does not send back a message of her own but simply attempts to “feed back” what she has heard or understood for verification by the sender (child).

Active listening steps:

- The listener focuses on understanding the message being sent and what it means (decodes).
- The listener puts what he has understood into his own words and “mirrors” it back to the sender.
- The sender gives verification that the message has been accurately understood or corrects the receiver's interpretation if it was inaccurate (and the listener tries again, recycling the above steps).

Feelings are the essence of active listening, but the receiver also reflects and summarizes the sender's thoughts and perceptions, and the content of the message.

- Active listening responses are **statements, not questions**.
- Active listening responses are the **parent's best guess** at how the child is feeling, not the parent telling the child how they are feeling or how they should feel.
- Although the active listening response is delivered as a statement, it is offered as a **tentative statement**, inviting the child's correction.

Active listening involves decoding the child's behaviors as well as their words.

- The parent may give an active listening response to the child stomping on the floor: "Wow, you really seem angry!"

(See handout: "Illustrating Active Listening")

Use of questions:

Getting the conversation started:

- If the child begins with a broad or loaded statement ("I'm never going back to school again--I hate school!"), the parent may ask a grief question or make a brief comment to elicit further information (e.g., "What happened?" or "Tell me about it."), and then proceed to use active listening responses.

Inviting feedback about the active listening response:

- After an active listening response, the parent may inquire, "Am I getting it?" or "Is that it?" or "Am I on the right track?" This is an invitation to the child to give feedback and correction.

Keeping the ball rolling:

- If the parent "reflects" the child's message, but the child does not continue to share more, the parent can ask questions about what the child has already said, staying close to the content already shared by the child so as not to introduce a new agenda or steer the direction of the conversation--active listening is following, not leading!

Active listening involves putting aside your own perspective for the time being and concentrating on understanding the child's experience, that is, "*putting yourself in the child's shoes*" and seeing the world as the child sees it.

- Active listening is not simply a parroting or rote repetition of the child's words.
- Active listening is hard work that requires focus and concentration.
- You want the child to see that we are working hard to understand their experience, that understanding how they are feeling is so important to you as to merit your full attention.
- Active listening responses are our best attempt at a synthesis of the child's experience, with an emphasis on their emotional experience.

Passive listening can be helpful but does not demonstrate to the sender that she has been accurately understood. ***When people feel understood, they feel more accepted.***

In order to do active listening effectively, the parent must be able to genuinely accept the child's feelings, no matter . . .

- . . . how different they are from her own;
- . . . how the parent thinks the child *should* feel;
- . . . or how difficult it is for the parent emotionally to experience how the child is feeling.

Active listening communicates understanding, acceptance, and respect for the individuality of the child.

Active listening enhances children's self-understanding and self-acceptance, is affirming, and increases self-esteem.

- Active listening helps children identify their feelings and explore their emotional experience.
- Having a clearer sense of their emotional experience helps children have a better understanding of their own behavior and improves their ability to regulate their behavior in the future.

Active listening does ***not*** mean that the parent agrees with the child's thinking or condones his behavior.

- Right now the parent is trying to understand the child's thoughts and feelings and communicate that understanding to the child.
- Later on the parent can work to correct faulty thinking and help the child learn more adaptive behaviors.

Roadblocks to Communication

(See handout: "The 'Dirty Dozen': Twelve Roadblocks to Communication")

Active listening opens the doors of communication. Many types of parent responses shut down the child's communication, such as ordering, lecturing, moralizing or excessive questioning.

There is a time and a place for many of the types of communication labeled as "roadblocks" in the handout. Lecturing can be a good thing sometimes. Kids need to know their parents' values and morals, and they need to know how to judge right from wrong.

However, these responses are not helpful for opening up communication from the child ***when that is your primary goal.***

Hearing children's strong feelings often makes parents feel anxious.

- Parents often feel a need to “do something” about what the child tells them: defend themselves, disagree, give advice to solve the problem, to lessen the child's pain or anguish, etc.
- Parents may have difficulty accepting their children as they are, right now, and letting them be themselves, rather than trying to mold them into something else.
- Parents who are unsure of their authority may worry that accepting the child's “unruly” feelings may lead to out-of-control behavior.

(See handout: p. 4)

Using “I-Messages” Instead of “You-Messages”

I-messages are a tool for parents to express strong feelings while maintaining respect for the child and protecting the child's emotional safety.

You-Messages

“Can't you do anything right? You'll never get ahead like that.”

“You never listen.”

“How dumb can you get.”

“You have to be a slob to live in such a filthy room.”

“Look at how you eat. You have no table manners. That's disgusting.”

“How many times have I told you not to do that? You should know better by now!”

The above statements are examples of “You-Messages.” You-messages put children down, blame, accuse, or nag. They often emphasize the word “you.”

You-messages tend to make children feel discouraged. Children who hear you-messages frequently may fight back, feel worthless, or simply stop listening.

You-messages do not enlist children's cooperation and over time can lower self-esteem.

I-Messages

I-messages show respect. Parents who talk about a problem with I-messages keep the focus on their own feelings and how the child's behavior affected them. They don't blame or label the child.

I-messages have four parts:

1. Tell **what you feel**. "I feel . . ."
2. Tell **what is happening**. ". . .when . . ."
3. **Explain why** you feel that way. ". . . . because . . ."
4. Tell **what you need or want**. ". I'd like you to . . ."

For example, "**I feel** upset **when** you make noise in the living room **because** I can't talk with my friend. **I need** you to keep the noise down please."

The elements of the I-message do not have to be in any particular order, and all the elements may not be present in every I-message. The emphasis is on your feeling and the reason you feel that way. The situation and what you want or need may be self-explanatory and not explicitly stated.

Sometimes you can just state the problem and leave out describing your feeling or what you want. For example, "I can't set the table when it's covered with toys."

It is extremely important to give an I-message **before you get really angry**. After you give an I-message, be ready to listen. Your child might want to talk about it.

If necessary, give a choice. For example, "You can play quietly in the living room **or** you'll have to play outside." I-messages show respect for the child but also let the child know that you expect cooperation.

Other examples:

"**I feel** worried **when** the floor is wet **because** someone might slip and get hurt. I need you to wipe up the water that spilled."

"**When** you don't brush your teeth, (**feeling**) we worry (**because**) that you will get cavities. (**need/want**) Please brush your teeth before we go."

Send positive and friendly I-messages too!

"(**when**) I noticed that you put away the laundry. **That makes me feel** great **because** you are really helping out."

When you use I-messages, children learn:

- What their actions mean to you.
- How to talk about a problem and share feelings without blame.

(See handout: p. 5)

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