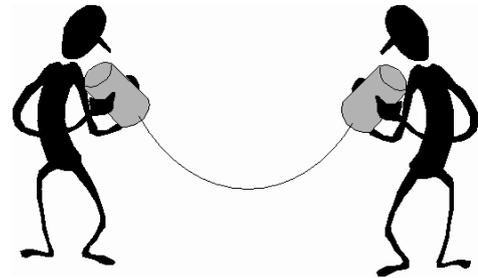


Effective Communication

Day-to-day communication principles and skills

Effective communication is a preventive skill. The way teachers communicate with children on a day-to-day basis can prevent problem behaviour from developing in the first place; manage it without recourse to punishment or reward or other strategies; and reduce and manage effectively the problems and negative feelings that children have which prevent them from learning.



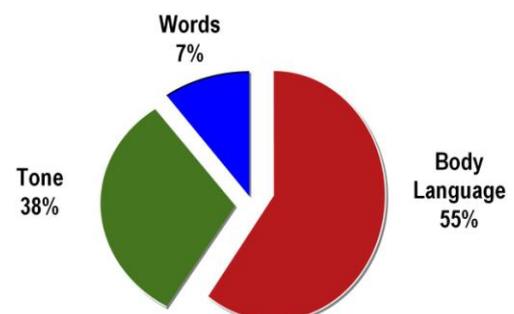
Problem behaviour, dependency, withdrawal, and feelings of defeat or inadequacy can be caused by misleading communication, without us even realising that we are sending messages which communicate something different to our intentions. Even though we have a strong desire to communicate, people typically inject barriers into their messages, and it has been estimated that these communication barriers are used up to 90% of the time when we are dealing with problems or feelings.



How we talk and listen to children throughout the normal course of a day has a big impact on the relationship, and behaviour. An understanding of the real messages we are sending when we communicate equips us to act mindfully. Basic communication principles and skills are the building blocks for positive relationships, and can be easily learned.

How we communicate

Some research estimates that our words make up as little as 7% of our communication when we are dealing with feelings or problems. Children are still learning language, but their ability to interpret tone of voice, facial expression and body language is highly developed. Sending 'mixed messages' results in confusion and misunderstanding, therefore it is important that our words are clear and direct, and they match our honest feelings. A message that is congruent and simple to understand is often enough. Our communication often includes unnecessary words which complicate the message. If there is a 'hidden message', this will be received more clearly than the words which obscure it.



The teacher-child relationship



The relationship a teacher has with a child has two aspects, the 'teacher role' (authority, discipline, rules), and the human relationship (respect, empathy, connection) These two aspects work together and support each other in creating a relationship whereby the teacher and child can both fulfil their 'roles' (teacher and learner) while at the same time enjoying a satisfying authentic relationship. The teacher therefore needs communication skills which express a clear authority as the teacher, at the same time as fostering real human connection. Focussing on one aspect at the expense of the other causes problems.

The principle of respect

Respect is the key to positive human relationships. Respect demands that we see the other person as a separate human being. Understanding this means that when an issue arises, we know whose 'business' we are in, ours or the child's. A teacher who communicates self-respect sets her boundaries firmly and states the rules clearly without the need for pleading, cajoling, threatening or manipulating. A teacher who respects the child can listen, help, and empathise without 'rescuing' or dismissing. The 'hidden message' in respectful communication is trust.

Understanding behaviour

The definition of behaviour is that which is done or said, can be seen or heard; it is an action which takes place in the physical world which can be photographed or recorded. Observing actual behaviour without adding in our judgements, interpretations, assumptions and subjective evaluations gives us the starting point for clear communication in dealing with it.

The teacher's business

Unacceptable behaviour creates problems for the teacher, not the child, so it is the teacher's business to challenge it. To be in 'ownership' of our problems and feelings arising from the behaviour of a child keeps the problem where it belongs. When we accept that it is our responsibility to deal with problems caused by others' behaviour towards us, and to let the other person know, we are able to communicate directly and clearly without blame or judgement directed towards the child.



The child's business



Just as the teacher's feelings about a behaviour are the teacher's business to manage, the child's feelings belong to the child. Allowing the child to have her own feelings – without taking them on, analysing, attempting to change them or dismissing them – is the first step to helping children manage their own feelings. Allowing and accepting negative feelings (though not always behaviour) leaves the problem where it belongs. Children express negative feelings intensely, but they can disappear as quickly as they appear. If we acknowledge them we communicate respect and trust, we neither dismiss nor indulge. Feelings are not yet problems, assuming that they are leads us to try to manage something that does not yet exist.

Practical applications in the classroom

From the principles outlined above, the teacher can take an approach to classroom management which is based on psychologically healthy relationships. How we treat each other, and ourselves, is the 'hidden curriculum' within the classroom. It is the place where children experience the workings of the social group outside of the home. No matter what their experience of living within a group at home, school is the place where they learn the rules of the bigger society, and their place within it.

The role of the teacher's authority in day-to-day rules

Children may come from families with no boundaries at all at one end of the scale, or a harsh authoritarian discipline at the other. School is the place where they can experience authority as a 'safe framework' within which they are free to become themselves and realise their full potential. To create the framework which holds a child safely, the teacher's authority is characterised by a confident, calm, matter-of-fact approach to rules and expectations of behaviour.

- Rules are stated clearly and directly as a matter of fact
- Non-negotiable orders and instructions are stated directly, with no threats or pleading added on to the message, and without being phrased as a request
- Trust and confidence in the child is expressed through a clear neutral tone of voice. A lack of trust can be expressed very subtly through a disapproving or overly 'nice' or placating tone
- A simple instruction, with eye-contact, followed by a 'thank you' and disengaging, communicates trust and expectation clearly – there is no need to watch the child to make sure they are obeying the instruction



Encouraging desired behaviour

Current research on the use of praise to reinforce 'good' behaviour suggests it may not have the desired effect. Labelling children can cause them stress and anxiety, create a fear of failure, or make them give up trying. Praise can be manipulative and insincere. What children do need is recognition and acknowledgement, we can do this without using labels.



behaviour makes you or others feel

- Notice a behaviour and let the child know you noticed
- Describe the effects of the behaviour on you or others
- Appreciate – say thank you
- Give your opinion, stated as such
- Let a child know how her

- A wink, a high five, or an appreciative glance communicates positive feelings
- Describe a piece of work rather than pronouncing it 'good'

The management of children's feelings

Feelings are contagious, and trying to change a child's feeling may be because of our own discomfort with it, which leads us to either dismiss or distract from it, or try to 'solve' it. In allowing children their negative feelings we express confidence in their ability to deal with them. In our society children are increasingly seen as psychologically fragile, it helps a child more if we assume they are robust. The teacher's business is to change negative behaviour, not negative feelings. They tend to disappear by themselves if accepted and acknowledged.

- Acknowledge a child's feelings or situation
- Take feelings seriously, but be fairly matter-of-fact
- Don't 'fan the flames' by using highly emotive words
- Assume the child will be ok – express empathy rather than sympathy
- Accept feelings if they are expressed in an acceptable way (not if the child is kicking you for example, when you need to deal with the behaviour first)
- Keep your expectations of appropriate behaviour, despite the feelings



The way we communicate daily with children has a big impact on their behaviour, motivation and willingness to learn. Knowing how to talk to children so that they understand, feel safe, and want to listen, and how to listen to children to draw them out, help them manage feelings, and improve the relationship are all fundamental skills. If we are in a clear authority and set clear boundaries as the teacher, while at the same time deepening the quality of the human relationship with the child, we pass on relationship skills for life.

Useful links:

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:

<http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/conation/maslow.html>

Common 'roadblocks' to communication:

http://egov.ocgov.com/vgnfiles/ocgov/HR/----%20Docs/P4P/P4P_The_Dirty_Dozen.pdf

Words and body language:

<http://www.businessballs.com/mehrabiancommunications.htm>

Research on the effects of praise:

<http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/spring1999/PraiseSpring99.pdf>

The science of feelings:

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept06/vol64/num01/The-Socially-Intelligent-Leader.aspx>

Further resources:

For research on the benefits of self-control v self-esteem

'Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength' Baumeister and Tierney, Penguin books 2011 pp 187-213

Further reading on self-esteem:

'Therapy Culture' Frank Furedi, Routledge 2004 pp 143 - 161

Useful on the neuroscience of feelings:

'Social Intelligence' Daniel Goleman, Arrow Books 2006

More neuroscience and current research:

'Nurture Shock' Bronson and Merryman, Twelve books 2009