



### **Building Strong Parent-Child Communication**

Meaningful parent-child communication provides a basis for a child's successful emotional development. We will discuss Lucy Daniels Center's view about how best to build parent-child communication.

Communicating respectfully with children is an art. We recommend that parents interact with their children with the same tact that they would use with another adult.

People communicate tactfully when they understand how their verbal and non-verbal communications will be experienced and understood by a recipient. Parents are safest if they assume that children and adults will respond to communications with mostly similar (although not identical) emotional responses. However, similarities in emotional responses may be obscured by the fact that children and adults may not show or respond to their emotions in the same ways.

Parents must coordinate the respectful tone and tact that they would use with another adult with the special requirements of the parental role, including the provision of explanations, limits and consequences. Achieving this coordination is the art of parental communication with children. We would like to illustrate this art with some examples.

*Four-year-old Karen dawdled in her classroom at pick-up time when her mother arrived. She did not respond when her mother said, "Come on, Karen, let's go home."*

Let's compare the following four possible subsequent communications from Karen's mother:

*"Karen, we need to go home and make lunch."*

We can easily imagine a similar, and respectful, comment from one adult to another. Perhaps one adult says to the other who is finishing a task, "Honey, we need to get going or we'll be late for the movie." Such a comment would be respectful if said with a tone devoid of any derision, mocking or undeserved anger.

However, there is another aspect of this example to consider. Karen's mother asked her to leave because leaving is the appropriate end-of-school day behavior. That is the core issue. Was she manipulating Karen by accentuating the lunch issue to leverage the transition? Manipulations are never respectful. A more honest, straightforward and thereby respectful communication may have been, "We need to go home because your school day is over and its time to go. I also would like to get home and start lunch."

*"Karen, I know that you want to stay, but I want to go. I am sorry you can't stay. Also, Mrs. Smith (the teacher) expects children to quickly finish up and leave when their mothers come. So, please, let's go."*

In this instance, Karen's mother chose to clarify the difference between her and Karen's feelings. She honestly presents her and Mrs. Smith's wishes as two separate reasons for leaving. Although regretful that the situation is not working out according to her daughter's preferences, she is neither apologetic nor defensive about her own wishes and authority. With a combination of limit setting and empathy, Karen's mother expressed her parental authority in a way that acknowledges the plight of the less powerful. Non-apologetic recognition of the power differential distinguishes parental respectful authority, which is growth promoting for a child, from authoritarian "because I'm the boss" authority, which interferes with a child's healthy growth. Parents should model and teach mutually dignifying authority rather than a dominating authority that denigrates both parties.

*"Karen, let's go. Right now."*

This communication highlights the fact that the respectfulness of a communication depends upon its overall context. From the perspective of adult-adult conversation, one spouse might say to the other with an ordering tone, "We need to go." The ordering tone would, in certain contexts, still be respectful. For example, perhaps the speaking spouse suddenly realized that they were about to be late, or had made previous attempts to mobilize the other spouse. However, even if Karen understood why her mother might reasonably resort to ordering her, one can also imagine contexts in which the communication would be unnecessarily controlling, demeaning or frightening. For example, perhaps blank faces have been associated in the past for Karen with frightening emotion or behavior.

*"Karen, I am tired of asking you to come. Put down what you are doing and let's go."*

This communication clearly implies that Karen has not responded to other requests. Therefore, Karen should understand that the anger in the communication is well earned. For that reason, Karen is more likely to experience this communication, as compared with the previous example, as disrespectful. The respectfulness of the communication would be enhanced if it was offered privately so Karen did not have to endure a public humiliation, and if the statement did not convey an attitude of disgust, which is also humiliating. If Karen did not respond, clear limit setting (that re-expressed the expectation along with a modest consequence if Karen did not comply) would be appropriate and fully respectful.

Strong parent-child communication rests upon respect. There is no rule for how to do it – it all depends upon the attitude with which communications are offered, and the context within which they occur. Children will confide in their parents when they have experienced their parents having coordinated parental responsibility with an empathic and dignifying attitude. Parental instructions, encouragement, rewards and consequences have less impact on children than do parental attitudes and actions. Parents should maintain their parental obligations to be guiding, encouraging and limiting, assume that their child has the similar reactions that their parent, a friend, or significant other would have in analogous situations, be as straightforward and mindful

of their child's feelings as they would be with any adult, and parents will be leading their child toward rich and respectful communication and relationships.