

# The impact of effective communication within the family

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## Abstract

Most verbal communication is done between one individual and another, be it in a family, social, or work setting. Any one-to-one verbal communication requires as much precision as possible, so that an individual can have immediate feedback as to whether he/she was understood accurately. Communicating effectively however involves more than just accuracy. The purpose of most communication is to influence the attitudes and behaviors of those being addressed. Since individuals have different ways of behaving and responding, it is important for people to learn to express themselves accurately and in a way that will accomplish their purpose of communication. This paper shows that developing good communication skills is critical for successful relationships. The paper reveals that good communication skills keep the family strong and better able to withstand every family issue and pitfall, and that effective communication is a key to family happiness. The paper also brings out the fact that effective communication within a family circle enables the family to handle stressors that arise, resolve daily conflicts, and raise children who are able to communicate well for the rest of their lives.

## Introduction

Communication is at the heart of everything we do. It is the foundation for interaction among human beings. Communication has to do with meanings, understandings, feelings, desires, needs and ideas. Communication enables us to live together, work together, get along with each other, and make this earth the best possible place.

Communication is the exchange or flow of information and ideas between one person and another. In principle, it involves a sender passing on an idea to a receiver. Effective communication occurs when the receiver comprehends the information or idea that the sender intends to convey. The ability to communicate with precision has a tremendous impact on the message that is communicated and its intended meaning. Most problems that people have arise because they are unable to sustain effective communication. Peter Drucker, for instance, claims that more than 60% of all management problems result from breakdowns in communications. A major study by the Rockefeller Foundation found that 68% of the customers who quit buying from their regular suppliers do so because employees fail to communicate effectively with those customers.

Efficiency experts claim that at least 40% of the average worker's time is spent doing tasks that are either unnecessary or have to be done over because they were not done

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according to instructions. This implies that the success of the transmission of a message depends on two factors—content and context. Content is the actual words or symbols that constitutes a part of the message, known as language. It could be either spoken or written. People interpret words in their own ways, so much so that even simple messages could be understood differently. Context on the other hand is the way the message is delivered using extra linguistic features - the tone, expression in the sender's eyes, body language, hand gestures, and state of emotion (anger, fear, uncertainty, confidence and so on). Since people believe what they see more than what they hear, they trust the accuracy of nonverbal behavior more than verbal behavior. So when they communicate, the other person notices two things: What they say and how they say it.

People generally think that communication is complete once they have conveyed the message. This is however not the case. There are high chances that messages are not perceived properly and when this happens, different reactions are given as feedback. This happens even within family communication and often leads to misunderstanding and conflict/dispute. A message can not be said to have been communicated successfully unless the receiver understands it accurately.

Family communication refers to the way verbal and non-verbal information is exchanged between family members (Epstein, Bishop, Ryan, Miller, & Keitner, (1993). Communication within the family is extremely important because it enables members to express their needs, wants, and concerns to each other. Open and honest communication creates an atmosphere that allows family members to express their differences as well as love and admiration for one another.

### **Data collection**

The data for this study was collected by means of a questionnaire that was distributed to 50 married staff (25 men and 25 women) of the National University of Lesotho. The informants targeted were those who have children between the ages of 1 to 25 years. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part 1 focused on communication between husbands and wife while part two focused on communication between parents and their children. The questions simply targeted the communication relationship between husbands and wives and parents and their children. The questions were designed to cover social issues, family matters and education. All in all, there were five semi-closed questions and one open question in the first part, and four semi-closed questions in part two. The semi-closed questions had an open part where informants could give their own experiences, while the open question was designed to get the participant's view point on the importance of effective communication within a family setting.

### **Developing good communication skills**

Every human is born with a desire to communicate, and that desire enables him/her to pick up words quickly and to enlarge his/her vocabulary continuously. That same kind of desire can enable one to enlarge his/her stock of words and improve his/her skill in employing them. Generally speaking, communication consists of sending and receiving messages through the use of language. Language is the primary conveyer of thoughts and ideas. It turns abstract concepts into words that symbolize those thoughts. Those words take the form of spoken sounds or written symbols.

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Some people think that the first requisite for good communication is an exhaustive vocabulary. However, as much as words and good grammar are important, it is important to know and use the words that the person you are communicating with will understand. The vocabulary that people use in everyday speech is most probably the words that they understand. Taking the case of a family for instance, the words that parents use are most likely what the children know and understand better, even if they learn more in school and from friends. Thus, if parents try to use words beyond the vocabularies of the household they are trying to communicate with, communication can not be effective as they may use words which the rest of the household does not understand.

The finesse of an individual as a communicator grows as he or she learns to identify and overcome the obstacles to communication. However, to be truly accomplished communicators, people must also cultivate the art of listening. It is easy to think of communication as a process of sending messages. But sending a message is only half the process; receiving it is the other half. So, at the appropriate time, people have to stop sending messages and prepare to receive by listening.

Listening is an important element in every conversation. In a family setting, conflicts could be avoided if each individual listens at an appointed time. As much as parents would always want their children to listen to them, they too should listen to their children and to each other. Listening should not only be done with the ears. Communicators should keep their eyes open so as not to miss out on much of the message conveyed through body language, as people usually convey feelings through paralinguistic features. The face for instance is an eloquent communication medium, so people should learn to read its messages because while a speaker may be delivering a verbal message, the face can be saying something more or something else. Some non-verbal signals can give a better idea of what is going on in the minds of others.

#### **Creating effective communication**

Communication is a process that involves various phases. There is more to communication than just speaking. In order to be able to communicate with precision and effectiveness one has to understand the basic process of communication. According to Needleman (2004), there are four major elements to consider if one has to create an effective communication. First of all, there is the speaker who conceives a message and looks for suitable words through which the message could be transmitted. Secondly, the message has to be transmitted to the listener. Thirdly, the listener is expected to understand and decode the message. Finally, the listener has to respond to the message by reacting according to the intended meaning of the message. If any of these four is not done correctly, communication can not be effective.

In the first case, a speaker has to consider the intention of his/her message before choosing the words that will best convey such an intended meaning. Generally, people believe that speaking is such a simple thing simply because they know what their thoughts are, and how to translate them into words. However, communicating one's thoughts is not as simple as it might seem because one has to take into consideration how the listener would understand such thoughts. For a listener to understand your thoughts as you do, you have to take into consideration not only your own mental dialect but most importantly that of your listener. Our mental dialect as Needleman (op. cit.) puts it, is the common language of the culture in which we are exposed to, and which is usually modified by the unique experiences of our lives. The experiences in our lives add color and shades of meaning to

the different words we know. Therefore, when people speak, they have to think of the mental dialect of the listener because the words might acquire different colors when they pass through the ears of the listener. In other words, a speaker has to convey the message in such a way that there are no opportunities for misunderstandings.

As Child (2004) puts it, to create an atmosphere of effective communication an individual should pass on the message using simple grammatical structures with the most appropriate language. The speaker should avoid padding language thereby making the message brief and appealing to the listener. The main points should be passed on early unless building up and the speaker should use analogy and metaphor (note that this can conflict with avoiding padding) only where necessary. From time to time, the speaker can make use of repetition to show emphasize or emphasize and pause to make sure the listener gets the most important part of the message. Above all, the speaker has to be fluent so that the ideas can flow and thus avoid a break in communication. When all these elements are observed from the part of the speaker or even writer, communication is bound to be successful. There will therefore be no misunderstandings in terms of the intended meaning and response from the listener.

Effective communication can only be done if a speaker takes into account all the features/elements that will make the message to be received and understood as intended. Communication can be said to be effective only when a communicator has conveyed a meaning and that meaning has been received by the other person exactly as it was sent. To know if a message has been conveyed effectively, one can test by asking questions and making observations. This will give an individual an opportunity to make sure that the real meaning that he/she wanted to convey has passed through the filters and has been received and understood as intended.

Finally, the purpose of any communication is to obtain a desired response. People want to communicate correctly because they want the listener to understand the meaning they have in their mental dictionary and react exactly as the message is intended. By reacting to a particular message, the listener is responding to the intended meaning of that message and this can be done only if the listener understands the message as it was intended. Once a message has been delivered, received and responded to, both communicators (speaker and listener) are able to assess what has been communicated. The communication cycle can be said to be complete only when there is a clearer understanding between the communicators. Although people may not always agree with one another, it is however important that communicators understand each other and it is only at this level that we can talk of effective communication.

### **Family communication**

The term family has been traditionally viewed in relation to blood ties, and marital or conjugal ties. This is supported by Liang (1972, p.3) when he says that we identify as families 'networks of people who live together over periods of time, who have ties of marriage and kinship to one another'. Terkelsen (1980, p. 23) on his part suggest that a family is a 'small social system made up of individuals related to each other by reason of strong reciprocal affections and loyalties, and comprising a permanent household (or cluster of households) that persist over years and decades'. The term 'family' is used in this paper to refer to the natural family which consists of two parents and their children. Thus, this is typically characterized by blood ties and the original marriage ties.

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According to Galvin and Brommel (1982) communication plays a central role in the growth of a family. Despite the rough times and differences that might exist in a family, communication holds a family together. Intimacy in a family depends largely on shared unique communication behavior. This implies that communication patterns may affect family relationships and vice versa. As Galvin and Brommel (1982) put it, within the framework of common cultural communication patterns, each family has the capacity to develop its own communication code based on the experiences of individual members and the collective family experience. Thus, communication not only serves as a simple transmission between two people, but alters and shapes the structure of the interpersonal system and the individual within it.

#### **Communication between spouses**

Communication is a key element in marital stability as marital adjustments are positively correlated with the capacity to communicate. Researchers have discovered a strong link between communication patterns and satisfaction with family relationships (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990). In fact, one researcher discovered that the more positively couples rated their communication, the more satisfied they were with their relationship five and a half years later (Markman, 1981). Marital and family researchers have discovered that unhappy family relationships are often the result of negative communication patterns (e.g., criticism, contempt, defensiveness). In fact, Gottman and his colleagues have found that satisfied married couples had five positive interactions to every one negative interaction (Gottman, 1994). Couples who are very dissatisfied with their relationships typically engage in more negative interactions than positive. It is very important for family members to verbally compliment and encourage one another.

In order to understand the role played by communication in marriage, some questions were given to the population mentioned earlier. The first question was to know the type of topics that couples discuss daily. To this question, 80% of the informants said they talk about pleasant things that happened during the day; discuss things that are of shared interest; and talk to each other about personal as well as family problems. The remaining 20% acknowledged that they scarcely have time to discuss. While the men of this group said it is because their schedules are different and so they come home at different times and hardly sit together to talk and also that their wives usually complain of being tired when they bring up a topic of discussion at night, the women explained that they only get to see their husbands in the morning because they usually come home at night while everyone else is sleeping. This explains why communication between them is difficult. One of the most difficult challenges facing families today is finding time to spend together. According to a recent Wall Street Journal survey, 40% of the respondents stated that lack of time was a greater problem for them than lack of money (Graham & Crossan, 1996). Couples are thus encouraged to spend as more time together as possible, and engage in positive interactions.

The next question was to find out if couples enjoy marital stability and what could be the possible reason(s). To this question, 70% of our informants acknowledged that they do enjoy marital stability and gave as the main reason the fact that they feel so free to discuss whatever issues with their partners. This group of informants actually indicated that communication is very important for the success of any relationship. In as much as couples have to love and respect each other, if they do not communicate their thoughts and feelings, there is bound to be misunderstanding among them which can inevitably lead to conflict and instability in the home. Interestingly, the respondents mentioned the

fact that although communication is vital, if not done properly, it may rather strain the relationship between couples. Some of the informants made it clear that it is not good to interrupt one another while talking. According to them, each person has a time to speak and a time to listen. Thus, when it is time for one person to speak, the other person has to do the listening until it is his/her turn. It is important to note that the 70% is among the 80% who admitted that they discuss various topics with their spouses. The other 30% of our informants said they do not have stable marriages. Among the reasons given as the root cause to this problem is the fact that they hardly have time to talk about family as well as personal issues with their spouses. Some women mentioned the fact that even when they try to talk, their husbands would monopolize the talking and impose their ideas on them, while rejecting what ever they say. In fact, some went to the extent of saying that they would rather not have a discussion with their husbands because each time they do and they say anything contrary to their husband's view or once they reject their ideas, it ends up in violence and physical abuse.

The third question was to know how couples communicate. Again, the same 70% mentioned above explained that while talking they make use of words that have private meaning to them so as to spice up their conversation and make it lovely. They also mentioned that because they generally talk most things over together, they have become sensitive to each other's feelings and therefore make adjustments accordingly when speaking. This is important because being sensitive to each other's feelings will enable couples to be freer to discuss intimate issues without restraint or embarrassment and thus live in a healthier and more stable environment. About 40% of the 70% said they also communicate nonverbally, to an extent, with the exchange of glances especially when they are with other people whom they do not want to share the information with. One of the respondents said 'in a social gathering for instance, when my wife looks at me in a particular way, I am able to know what she implies. Sometimes it could be that she does not want me to continue in a particular discussion; sometimes it could be that she wants us to take our leave; sometimes it could be that she wants me not to drink anything more; etc'.

The next question was to find out if our informants think their relationship with their spouses can be considered as intimate. To this question, some informants acknowledged that they have intimate relationship with their spouse because they are open to each other and are free to talk to each other about any issues. Others said they are far from being intimate partners because of total lack of communication. This is true because intimacy is developed through specific communication behaviors within a family. Some of these communication behaviors include: self-disclosure, confirmation and sexual communication. Confirmation behavior gives value to an individual as a person and may be found in recognition, dialogue, acceptance and personal treatment. A couple that does not dialogue will obviously fail to recognize one another's potentials, refuse to accept one another's view and will certainly not treat each other well. With such a couple, intimacy can be far fetched. Self-disclosure on the other hand involves communication about the self and provides a vehicle for deep sharing and personal growth within a relationship characterized by self-esteem, confirmation and commitment. Healthy self-disclosure is critical to the development of intimacy within family relationships and for this to take place, couples have to be free to dialogue on any subject concerning them. Another important factor that leads to intimacy is sexual communication which involves sexual behavior as a form of marital communication and a contributing factor to overall marital satisfaction. Each family socializes its members into certain sexual beliefs and attitudes within the

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context of the family rules. Sexual encounters have the potential for conveying messages of intimacy or conflict. So, couples need to communicate effectively on sexual matters in order to remain intimate.

Question five was intended for participants to say how they handle stressors in the family. Most of our informants responded to this question by stating clearly that communication is the key to solving any problems within a family. Some informants added that even where a problem can not be solved in a family, good communication can enable members to cope with such a problem. Hence, a family that communicates well will obviously be able to handle any stressful situation/problem even if there is no solution to such a situation/problem.

Finally, informants were asked to give their own views about the importance of communication within the family setting. Some of the informants (precisely those among the 20% mentioned earlier) simply neglected this question, while a few said they think it is important as it may help in clarifying some issues that would otherwise lead to conflict but added that they however not enjoy this advantage since they scarcely communicate with their spouses. A majority of the informants however acknowledged the importance of communication in a family. They said that communication is not only important but a very vital element in a family as it enables the family to stay united, stable and healthy.

#### **Communication between parents and children**

Parent versus children communication is a very important element in the growth of a child. It does not only enable a child to adapt to the environment in which s/he is growing, but also enables him/her to develop an open and an informative mind and provides a base for social and educational stability. Like the case for spouses, in order to know the relationship between parents and their children in terms of communication, a number of questions were addressed to the parents.

The first question was to know if parents have specific topics they discuss with their children. To this question, 60% of our informants responded that they do not have specific topics. Rather, they involve their children in any conversation of the day, where necessary, irrespective of the topic. To them, communication on all aspects of life is important between children and their parents because it enables them to know the world in which they are and thus adjust according. Some added that when children are blank of certain realities, they become embarrassed when they meet such situations and obviously become misfit in society. It is thus the role of parents to furnish their children with information they need to know in order to cope with the challenges awaiting them, and this can be done only through open and free communication with them. The remaining 40% said they have specific topics they discuss with their children. Some of them said it is not wise to discuss certain things, such as sexual matters, with children. They are expected to know that such topics are taboos and so can not be discussed publicly, and especially not with children. They went further to say that conversation between children and parents should center on things that have to do with their education, respect for elders, politeness and housekeeping.

The next question was intended to find out if there are any rules of talking when discussing with children. Most of our informants' (85%) response to this question was that children are expected to know when to talk and when to listen. As such, they agreed that there are rules of talking although some of them went further to say that such rules must not

necessarily be laid down in writing. Through constant communication with your children, they tend to adapt to the norms following corrections from the parents from time to time. Hence, a well brought-up child will know that children do not talk back at their parents, or know when he/she has to respond to the parents, and when not to. The remaining 15% of our informants said there are no rules of talking when discussing with their children. To this category of informants, children should be made to feel free to communicate with their parents. Laying down rules will scare them from wanting to talk to their parents and this will lead them to keeping certain information which may in turn be detrimental to healthy growth.

Although it is necessary that children should feel free to talk to their parents, there are some standard norms of conversations that need to be respected. Thus, in order for children not to get embarrassed in the society in which they live, parents should not only make them feel free to communicate, but also make them to know the norms of communication. For instance, children have to be made aware of the fact that it is not good to interrupt someone while that person is speaking, or that they must not speak all the time but must also learn to listen, etc.

The third question was to know how parents handle the problems created by their children. Almost all the informants (90%) said they begin by asking the child what lead to that situation. They all said that it is not usually good to take certain actions on children without giving them the opportunity to explain what went wrong. To them, parents should engage in a dialogue with children no matter how grievous a situation may look. After dialoguing with a child, a parent can then decide on what to do. If the action of the child warrants any punishment, the parent can then go ahead to punish the child after making the child understand through communication that what he/she did was wrong. In that way, the child learns from the action committed and becomes part of the decision making of the effect of his/her action. The other 10% said once a child creates a problem, he/she is punished accordingly. To them, children should be punished once it is clear that they have done something wrong. However, although it is good to correct children accordingly, it is also good to hear their own side of the story before taking any action. By giving the child an opportunity to explain what he/she did, it does not necessarily mean one is shying away from punishing the child. Rather, it will even go a long way to make the child understand why he/she has to be punished and thus avoid doing such things in future.

The last question focused on whether our informant's children feel free to have a conversation with them. 80% of the informants responded by saying that their children are made to feel free to talk to them at all times. Of this group, 20% added that they however know the type of topics they are not expected to bring up in a conversation. As such, although children of these parents feel free to talk to them, they do not have the liberty to discuss everything. They are thus forced to limit their conversations to non-conflicting topics. The other 60% believe that children should be allowed to express what is in their minds. Limiting children on what and when to talk may make them not to grow in a very healthy environment in terms of self expression and interactions and may go a long way to making them not to have open, independent and clear minds. To these parents, when children are made to feel free to discuss any topic with their parents, they end up having open, clear and nurturing conversations with their peers, teachers, etc. These kind of children, they added, are flexible and have intimate relationship with their parents through communication and shared believes. The remaining 20% of informants said their children find it difficult to engage in a conversation with them. 10% of this number (precisely men)



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said they do not actually have time for any discussion with children and added that if a child has something that is troubling him/her, he/she could tell the mother who in turn could tell him. To them, issues concerning children should be handled by mothers and they can only come in if the matter is above the mother to handle. The other 10% said they are so strict by their nature and because of this, their children get scared most often and will only talk to them when they really have to. They also added that they are so busy and hardly have time to sit with their children for any discussion. Some of them admitted that this is not a healthy way of bringing up children as it may affect their social interactions at school and elsewhere. One of the informants even said she regrets the fact that she does not talk with her children because she once had a call from a teacher who said her child is always quiet in class, is actually very timid and does not respond to any question not because he does not know the answers but because he does not know how to communicate them. Parents are thus encouraged to engage their children into conversations of all type, provided they are healthy for the children, so that they can become good communicators in their societies.

#### **Discussion and conclusion**

In this paper, I have examined the role of communication within a family. To get a better understanding of the role of communication, I began by looking at what it means to be a good communicator and how one can communicate effectively. The study shows that to become effective in communication, people have to practice the art of communicating. The techniques of communication have to become part of the daily activities of each individual so as to be able to become a natural good communicator. When people practice the art of communication, they improve on their communicative patterns. Therefore, the more the techniques of communication are practiced, the easier it will become to connect with others through communication, at both individual and group levels. This implies that effective communication is achieved through time and consequently patience. There is no one who can claim to be a well polished, professional communicator from the very beginning. It takes much patience to become an effective communicator. Through practice over time, people gain experience and can thus polish their communicative competence especially when used purposely.

Whatever communication task an individual undertakes, his/her objective is to connect with people. Family communication is the same. A family that communicates effectively stays together. Sometimes it is not only lack of communication that keeps certain family members separated but also lack of effective communication. For instance, a child whose one parent is not a good/effective communicator, or who always avoids one parent by communicating all his/her desires or concerns through the other parent will remain very distant from the former but very close to the later. Good communication between parents and their children is the very best way to keep children safe. When parents communicate well with their children, the later will always feel secure to turn to the former for advice on any issues. But children whose parents do not communicate with them will not go to their parents for advice when need arise but will rather turn to friends and non family members who may advice them wrongly. Also, children who are victims of physical and mental abuse by their parents will hardly have good communication relationship with their parents.

Family communication patterns serve to bring members together or to separate them as the family moves through its developmental stages. Certain communication patterns and behaviors are more predictable at particular periods of life. Good communication within the family is hoped to enhance movement through life's developmental stages making life richer as members grow closer together. Through family communication children, for

instance, are able to learn how to socialize with others; learn issues concerning sexual identity; learn about kinship relations, housekeeping, conflicts, power, decision making; learn to be respectful at all times, to tell the truth at all times, be polite at all times; know when to talk and when not to; etc.

Family systems encounter external stress from crisis situation as well as from developmental change. The ability of a family to cope effectively with stress depends on a number of factors among which is communication. As has been seen in this paper, a family that communicates well is more likely to work through its crisis because communication serves to facilitate coping process in a stressful situation. Open and supportive discussions help the family to go through the different stages of stress and adapt to various challenges.

Conflicts always occur in families. However, instead of looking at conflict negatively, it can be a creative learning process for all family members if they effectively observe and analyze the conflict rather than becoming overwhelmed by it. By communicating their views and being open to listen to others, members can use constructive and fair fighting techniques within a supportive atmosphere in the family to overcome any such conflict. Also, families can use constructive conflict to resolve differences and bring back family intimacy since effective communication, as seen in this paper, leads to intimacy. Communication rules often provide parameters for conflict. So, families should avoid setting rules except where really necessary.

Achieving intimacy as well as maintaining it involves great effort and risk. Communication is usually at the core of any intimate relationship. Families that remain healthy are families that recognize the interdependence of all members and try to promote the growth of the family as well as that of individuals through open, clear and nurturing communication. In other words, a healthy family is one that grows in an atmosphere of openness, flexibility and intimacy through communication and shared believes.

I would like to conclude this paper by saying that people should learn to understand that family issues center around communication and compromise. While one member of a family may need one thing, others may have very different priorities. A compromise can however be arrived at through open communication, by letting everyone get some of what they want, even if no one is completely satisfied all the time. Family members should know that poor communication leads to misunderstandings and unhappiness. They should therefore avoid keeping quiet about things that border them, avoid saying one thing and doing the other, and avoid being on the offensive all the time. For those parents who are so busy and scarcely have time to engage in family communication, they could make up for this by calling regular family meetings when ever they are free. By doing so, they are not only enhancing the quality of communication in their family but will also be able to avoid the common pitfalls in the family and society. Such meetings could be from time to time and the agenda could be anything that a family member wants to bring up, so that issues get aired before they can lead to a crisis. In so doing, everyone has a chance to speak without being interrupted, criticized, or belittled and to be heard, and the family can thus make decisions that are safe and healthy for all.

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