



Orientation & Training Division

Kids Central, Inc.

FAMILY SERVICES COMPONENT

Module: 1

Topic: Communicating With Parents

Communicating in the Head Start Community

Outcomes: As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:

- * Understand the role communications plays in creating and maintaining positive relationships,
- * Identify factors that enhance the appeal of messages, and
- * Recognize that every communication is an opportunity to reinforce Head Start's mission of valuing parents.

Key Concepts: Effective interpersonal communication is the key to building staff/parent partnerships. This partnership recognizes and supports the significant role that parents play in the Head Start program and in the lives of children.

Effective staff/parent communication is a two-way process, where both staff and parents give and receive information and feel valued.

People respond positively to communications that are relevant and appealing, and that are expressed clearly. By understanding and employing the factors that contribute to successful communications, staff can increase the effectiveness of their communications with parents.

Background Information

Effective communication is probably the single most important factor that influences the success or the partnership between parents and staff. While much has been written and said about the pivotal role of communication in staff and parent relationships, the one clear constant is that communication requires ongoing practice - practice in listening, observing, reflecting, speaking, and writing.

However, before beginning to practice the many varied discrete skills that go into effective communication, it is important to consider the *value* of communication. The value lies in the experience of understanding and being understood, not in any particular skills used to make a point. Too often in a communication, we focus on the message that we want to get across, forgetting to be open to what the other person is trying to say. **A dynamic, two-way communication can take place only when both parties feel valued, accepted, and secure in the knowledge that they will be heard and respected.** Therefore, the key to effective communication is to begin by creating a "positive space" for sharing.

Another key to effective communication is to **always take the time to consider the individual with whom we are communicating**. This is particularly important when communicating with parents at Head Start because they, like everyone else in our modern society, are overwhelmed with demands on their attention. Balancing family, work, school, and personal life often requires parents to juggle activities, do two things at once, rush through tasks, or make choices on what will and won't get done. To cope with all of the competing demands for their time, people naturally tend to select some things to focus on, others to ignore, and still others to do with only half their attention.

What this means for Head Start staff is that they cannot always assume that the message they intend to send is being received - whether it be in a group meeting, in a one-on-one conversation, or through a written message. **Staff can, however, increase the likelihood that a parent will focus on a particular communication by presenting information in a way that clearly relates it to the individual parent's needs and interests, is easily understood by that parent, and matches that parent's particular communication style.**

A key reason behind the success of the children in Head Start is staff and parents working together. Successful communication between staff and parents is therefore essential. **Staff can ensure that kind of success by always opening communication in a positive way and by tailoring their communication to match the individual.**

Every interaction is an opportunity to build partnerships. Positive statements can pave the way - they can set people at ease and make them more open to participation and partnership building. In addition, all interactions - whether in one-on-one conversations, group situations, or formal settings - are opportunities for learning to observe and listen better and thus to improve our communication skills and strengthen our relationships.

As staff interacts with families, they become better communicators.

Families and staff are partners at Head Start. **Positive** language, as practiced in this activity, is the language of partnership. Approaching families **positively** lets them know that they are valued. This increases the likelihood that families will be open and communicative in response. Furthermore, staff can learn to be better communicators by paying attention to the way that others communicate. By observing and listening to the ways that family members communicate effectively with each other and with staff, staff can learn how to tailor our strategies to be most effective with the many individuals they communicate with each day.

People are constantly acquiring new communication strategies.

This activity reinforced the message that a **positive** statement can create more openings for successful communication. From other moments, today, tomorrow, and throughout our lives, staff can learn other effective communication strategies. As you expand your range of communication strategies, you become increasingly better equipped to select the most appropriate strategies to use in any given situation. This entire learning packet is designed to promote improvement in communication skills.

This last section of this programmed learning packet really gets to the obvious about **positive** communication, and why it is a must that as staff of Head Start we have to do this if we are to improve relations with our parents, children and each other.

If we are to promote **positive** involvement in Head Start, and this includes not only parents, but with others staff and the children we serve, these are factors that are really necessary in our communications:

Factor	Positive	Negative
Understanding communication.	Ease of understanding promotes listening, reading, responding, etc.	Difficulty in understanding promotes confusion, uncomfortableness, and escape behavior.
Interest, relevance and importance of communication.	Easy to stay involved, participation is rewarding .	Boredom, resentment, and feeling like being taken advantage of.
Difficult vocabulary or a lot of jargon.	Words that are understandable promote self worth.	Words or phrases that are not understandable undermine self worth.
Communicate with emphasis on the person more than the message.	Person feels important and accepted as an individual.	Words and tones that are scholarly, bureaucratic or condescending may make people feel diminished.
Organization or stability of communication.	Consistent and clear communication encourages trust.	Unclear communications promote confusion and lack of trust.
Respectful and open to exchange.	Communications are better received if pleasant or straight and respectful.	Unpleasant or threatening communication usually provoke retaliation or escape responses.