



Furthering Families

Communicating with your family: The family decision-making process

The family is a complex unit consisting of individuals with different thoughts, feelings, and ideas that can make communicating and decision-making challenging. The ability to make good decisions is a skill that, when developed over time, can help family members improve their skills. Conflict is a natural part of life. The ability to handle conflict effectively can reduce the stress in your home. Here are some ideas for resolving conflict.

How can I communicate more effectively with my family?

There are many ways of communicating that can be put into two groups:

- **Verbal communication** includes not only the words you say, but also the tone of your voice and how you say things.
- **Non-verbal communication** is harder to define because it includes everything, except the words, that you do when you communicate. Non-verbal communication includes eye contact, posture, gestures, attentiveness and interest.

An important part of verbal communication is reflective listening which helps both the speaker and the listener to be clear about the situation and acknowledge the behavior or action taking place. You may already use reflective listening, but you may want to be sure to practice during periods of high stress and conflict. The steps are to:

- Paraphrase and reflect back by restating in your own words what you heard the speaker say.
- Reflect back on the meaning of what was said, thinking about what the speaker told you, including how they feel.
- Summarize what you have heard, again, repeating the message you heard.

What is decision making?

- Effective group decision-making can reduce conflict between your family and your environment, as well as between family members.
- There several steps in the decision-making process:
 - Define the problem.
 - Brainstorm all possibilities or potential alternatives.
 - As a group, select the best possible alternative.

- Follow through and carry out the decision.
- Evaluate the decision and adapt, if necessary

Here are examples of how a decision can be made:

1. A decision may be reached by one person giving up his or her position to reduce or settle the conflict. This may be an easy way out for less vocal family members, but there is a risk of cutting off communication with those family members and increasing stress.
2. Another style is when family members take an active role in the decision-making process by each person taking a turn “stating their case.” Everyone then has a say in the outcome. Families who use this style are typically more flexible and open because they seek input from each member.
3. Sometimes families have trouble getting past the brainstorming part of the process so one person may make a decision for the whole family. The family’s reaction to this decision-making style can be either positive or negative. Family members may feel angry or hurt because they have no control or power over the decision, or they may be relieved that a decision has finally been made.

The following tips will increase your chance for a positive decision-making experience:

- Respect each family member as an individual.
- Be open to others’ ideas and suggestions.
- Actively listen to others’ points of view.
- Select a time when all family members who may be affected by the decision are able to fully participate.
- Communicate effectively using reflective listening.
- Avoid criticizing, yelling, blaming, or name-calling. If you are feeling out of control, stop. Wait until you are able to communicate in a calmer manner.

How can my family reduce conflict?

Conflict is a normal part of everyday life and is neither good nor bad. What can be harmful is how we react to conflict. Here are ideas for reducing the stress we may experience from conflict:

- Separate work life from family life. Discuss your work problems at work and be involved with family activities when you are at home.
- Define family roles and responsibilities. It is easier to get along with each other if everyone understands what is expected of them.
- Set realistic goals. Be sure the goals your family chooses are reasonable and can be met within your timeframe.
- Decrease conflict by:
 - Practicing good communication skills,
 - Making sure individual values are not in conflict with other family members,
 - Providing effective leadership, and/or
 - Addressing conflict calmly when it occurs. If you feel too emotional, wait until you are able to talk about the conflict in a positive and constructive way.

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