



Intentional Communication

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Listen to an audio file of this resource.

Introduction

The key to many parenting challenges is finding ways to communicate with your child where both your needs and your child's needs are met. Although this sounds simple, in the heat of the moment it is difficult to identify and differentiate

- your needs,
- your wants, and
- the positions you take.

It is also difficult to identify and differentiate

- your child's needs,
- your child's wants, and
- the variables that are contributing to their response.

Most parents and those in a parenting role can probably identify with a conversation that sounds something like the following:

CHILD: *"I want a ham sandwich!"* [Stating a want; the need is I'm hungry]

PARENT: *"This is not a restaurant! You'll eat what's for dinner, and it's not dinner time yet."* [Taking a position]

The result of this conversation is that the child is upset, and the parent or one in a parenting role is angry. This conversation ends in a way that takes away from the relationship rather than enhances it.

Intentional communication helps both you, the parent (or one in a parenting role), and your child get your needs met in a way that supports and even enhances the relationship. The result is a child who learns how to

- understand and manage oneself,
- relate to others, and
- make responsible choices based on self and others ([social and emotional skills](#));

and a parent who enjoys, rather than dreads, having a tough conversation with their child.

Intentional communication does not happen by chance. Intentional communication is deliberate. As a parent or someone in a parenting role, you can do it! With practice and patience, you will see results in your child and in yourself.

Intentional communication skills are not easy, so a method called scaffolding is recommended. Scaffolding is waiting to add a new skill until the previous skill is stable. Essentially, start slow, and as you get better, add more.

The rest of this document is divided into three parts. First, intentional communication is defined in detail. Next, reasons why using intentional communication is important are provided. And finally, examples of how to use intentional communication are described.

What Is Intentional Communication?

Intentional communication is a way of communicating that deliberately fosters [social and emotional skill development](#). Put simply, social and emotional skills include

- understanding and managing oneself,
- relating to others, and
- making responsible choices based on self and others.

Intentional communication creates a safe environment that allows you and your child to increase your awareness about

- what you are feeling,
- what you want, and
- what you need (self).

Intentional communication creates space to listen to each other and understand what the other person is feeling as well as the other person's wants and needs (others). Intentional communication allows for developing a mutually beneficial solution where both your needs and your child's needs are met (the choices we make based on self and others).

An intentional communication approach is a two-way exchange that includes

- talking,
- listening, and
- spending time truly understanding the other's point of view.

It's about "talking with" as opposed to "talking to." Lecturing and giving advice are one-way approaches to communication and do not align with intentional communication. Intentional communication provides opportunities to grow cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement is intentionally being an active participant in processing information and reflecting on the content.

For parents of infants and young children, intentional communication includes getting to know and understand your child's facial expressions, movements, and sounds. Infants and young children need to feel that they can successfully communicate with you. Each time you are responsive to your child's cries and needs, showing them love and care, they feel understood and learn about the two-way and intentional nature of communication.

Why Engage in Intentional Communication?

Intentional communication grows social and emotional skills. [Social and emotional skills](#) are associated with a variety of successful life outcomes for you and your child. Intentional communication is not just to inform, it develops your child's skills and strengthens your relationship with your child ([see Intentional Ways to Grow a Healthy Parenting Relationship](#)). Intentional communication grows the brain by creating a safe space for learning. It encourages curiosity from your child rather than defensiveness. Intentional communication teaches and models an effective communication approach that has broad application in many areas of your life and your child's life. These skills are applicable

- in school,
- at work,
- with friends,
- in conflict, and
- in communicating with others.

Intentional communication fosters a sense of ownership in the communication because it is participatory and more relevant and meaningful.

How Do You Do Intentional Communication?

Intentional communication includes

- creating the conditions for intentional communication,
- listening actively to understand what is being said and the feelings being communicated,
- using “I-messages,” and
- apologizing when needed.

Create the Conditions for Intentional Communication

An optimal setting is one where both parties can truly hear and learn from each other. Unfortunately, when you feel upset or react, the part of your brain that can listen or learn is not engaged. To get beyond a place where you are reactive and instead to a place where your brain can listen and learn, self-regulation skills are needed. To help your child get to this place, you can use empathy and connection. If the conditions for intentional communication are not created, it is easy to end up with conversations that do not facilitate actual change in behavior and that potentially wear down the relationship. Creating the right conditions fosters positive interactions and models empathy and respect.

Tips to Create the Conditions for Intentional Communication

- Start by connecting. Focus on the relationship before the content. You could use an empathic statement like: *“You seem really upset about this.”* Or ask an open-ended question like: *“How are you feeling about this?”*
 - For parents with infants, connect by responding to their cries. Notice gestures and narrate what you are doing. You could say, *“You seem uncomfortable. Let me change your diaper and see if that helps.”* Or you could say, *“I hear you crying. I think you might be hungry. I’ll feed you and see if that helps you feel better.”*
 - For parents with young children, connect by getting down on your child's level, making eye contact, and then engaging them by noticing gestures or facial expressions and listening for thoughts and feelings. You could say, *“You look worried. Are you feeling worried?”* or *“You seem sad. Is that right?”*

- Describe the purpose for the conversation.
 - *“I’d like to talk about sharing your toys with your sister.”*
 - *“I’d like to hear more about how things went on the playground today.”*
 - *“I’d like to talk with you about your plans for this weekend.”*
 - *“I’d like to see if we could reach a better understanding about what time you start your homework each night.”*
- Make sure there is enough time available. Find a mutually agreeable time. Don’t start a serious conversation when you or your child are upset. Make sure the time you have set aside is a priority (no cell phones, no TV, etc.).
 - *“What would be the best time for us to talk?”*
 - *“Do you have a few minutes to talk after dinner?”*
- Be aware of your state of mind and your child’s state of mind. Your own emotions and current state will influence the way you listen and talk. Your child’s frame of mind also matters. After a bad game or after flunking a test is not a time to talk about practicing or studying more. Recognizing your child’s mood and deciding on an appropriate time is important (e.g., It is difficult to have a serious conversation when they are in a silly mood).
 - *“Let’s take a break from this topic and talk more later tonight.”*
 - If a child is crying, offer comfort items like a favorite teddy bear or a blanket. Do not attempt to talk through anything when a child is highly upset. Focus on calming down first.

Listen Actively

Active listening is seeking to truly understand someone. It is a two-part style of listening. First, convey you are listening through your body language (e.g., nodding, eye contact). Second, convey understanding by stating back what you have heard or feelings that have been communicated. If you do not quite understand or need more information, ask open-ended questions. It takes practice to truly listen and understand without placing assumptions or judgment on what is being heard.

Infants cry between two and three hours every day. In fact, their primary form of communicating with you is through crying. Paying close attention to your infant’s facial expressions, movements, and sounds helps you understand what they are trying to communicate.

Young children may cry, yell, hit, bite, grab, kick, hide, or pout to express feelings. They are learning to identify their big feelings and to understand the body sensations that go with them. Becoming sensitive to the nuances of your young child’s verbal and nonverbal expressions will help you be responsive to their needs and will grow their trust in you.

Listening actively is important for your child. Active listening:

- Shows your child you are genuinely interested in what they are saying
- Creates a respectful interaction that honors your child’s thoughts and feelings
- Allows your child to explore ideas and clarify ideas and feelings, which builds self-awareness
- Allows your child to practice self-soothing skills, which builds self-regulation
- Models for your child how to engage in active listening
- Strengthens social and emotional skills such as empathy, identifying emotions, communication, and reflecting

Listening actively is important for you as a parent or someone in a parenting role. Active listening helps you:

- Slow down and suspend assumptions while truly listening to what your child is saying, feeling, and thinking
- Clearly understand the verbal and non-verbal message your child is communicating
- Clarify meaning, seek additional information, and learn about your child
- Have a respectful interaction that builds and strengthens your parent-child relationship
- Build your social and emotional skills like: perspective taking, empathy, respect for others, listening, and patience

How to Engage in Active Listening

- Pay attention without distraction.
 - *“Let me turn off the TV and silence my phone.”*
- Be aware of your body language and notice your child’s body language.
- Be responsive to your infant’s cues. Your infant’s cries connect with their body language.
 - If an infant is uncomfortable, they may use a less intense, short, whiny cry like “eh, eh, eh.” Respond by loosening or changing their clothing, swaddling, or changing their position. Test these responses to see if they help soothe.
 - If an infant is tired, they may be rubbing their eyes with them closing and opening. They may pull at their ears and yawn. Respond by putting them down for a nap.
- Use open-ended questions to invite your child to tell their story in their own words without leading them in a specific direction.
 - *“How does this make you feel?”*
 - *“Can you describe what happened at school before math today?”*
 - *“Can you help me think through how you can join the school club and have time to finish homework and chores?”*
 - *“How can we work together to solve the struggle we seem to be having about cell phone use?”*
- Convey understanding by reflecting and paraphrasing what you have heard or feelings that have been communicated.
 - *“So, you feel angry?”*
 - *“It sounds like you are wanting more time, so you don’t feel rushed?”*
 - *“You’re saying that...”*
 - *“Almost as if...”*
 - *“It’s like...”*
 - *“It feels like...”*
- When your young child expresses any big emotion, be sure and name that feeling asking if you are correct: *“You seem angry. Is that right?”* This builds their emotional vocabulary adding to their self-awareness and ability to manage their feelings.



Tip

Remain calm even when you hear something you don’t like.



Trap

Avoid interrupting, judging (*“that’s a bad idea”*), and giving advice (*“I think you should...”* *“Why don’t you try...”*).

Using “I-Messages”

The purpose of communication is to deliver a message in a way that it can be well received. It is more important to deliver less information in a way that your child can understand, than to deliver all the information you have all at the same time. Using “I-messages” allows your child to receive the information without raising defenses.

“I-messages” are about conveying the impact of someone’s actions without blame. Notice the difference between:

“You are being so rude by slamming the door like that,” and

“I feel upset when you slam the door.”

Put simply, the “I” portion is the impact on you; the “you” portion is the behavior you noticed. “I-messages” leave out any interpretation of the behavior (e.g., *“You did it because you don’t care”*). “I-messages” avoid making any guesses about the intention behind the behavior (e.g., *“You did it to get your way”*).

“I-messages” model for your child a way of communicating that is respectful in different settings (conflict with peers, teachers, other adults, etc.). “I-messages” also allow you to express your opinions without eliciting negative reactions. “I-messages” work well during conflict and build the relationship by not assigning blame. “I-messages” also build social and emotional skills such as communication, constructively negotiating conflict, respect for others, self-discipline, and regulating emotions.

How to Do an “I-Message”

“I-messages” usually contain three parts: my feeling / your behavior / the impact. For example, *“I feel terribly worried (my feeling) / when you come home later than we agreed (your behavior) / I can’t stop thinking the worst (the impact).”* Including these three parts in the message is very different from a message like: *“You are so disrespectful because you came home late.”*

When communicating with older children, you can add additional details about how you interpret the behavior (the story you tell about the behavior). For example, *“I feel angry when you slam the door, and the story I tell is that you don’t care. Help me correct my story.”* This is very different from *“You are so inconsiderate”* or *“You just don’t care.”*

Rather than saying, *“If you do that one more time, you will go straight to your room,”* try saying, *“When I see you do that, I feel sad because it hurts my feelings, and it makes it hard for me to keep playing with you.”*



Tip

Value yourself and your ideas. Be authentic. Respond calmly and consistently. Make sure the environment is conducive to conversation. Make sure your expectations are appropriate for your child’s age and stage of development. Use language that is age appropriate, straightforward, and simple.



Tip

“I-messages” can be used to promote positive behaviors as well. You could say, *“It makes me happy to see you sharing your toys with your friends. When you share with your friends, it makes them want to share their things with you as well.”*



Trap

Avoid starting with “I” to couch a “you” statement like, *“I feel that you are being rude.”* Instead say, *“I feel hurt when you raise your voice at me.”*

Apologize

Taking responsibility or admitting when you are wrong is excellent modeling and demonstrates vulnerability and a willingness to grow. Being able to apologize sends the message that making mistakes is part of learning and getting better. It not only creates an environment where it is okay to make a mistake, it establishes behavioral norms that we take responsibility for our actions.

Apologizing models for your child that it is okay to admit mistakes and helps to develop their [social and emotional skills](#) such as: perspective taking, emotion regulation, and responsibility. Parents and those in a parenting role also benefit from apologizing because it strengthens the relationship they have with their child and provides an opportunity for reflection.

Tips on How to Apologize

- Be genuine – apologize for what you truly mean.
- Start with *“I’m sorry”* or *“I apologize”* and be specific about for what you are apologizing.
- Do not use “if”; use “that” instead. For example, rather than, *“I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings,”* say *“I’m sorry that I hurt your feelings.”*
- Don’t make excuses or apologize in a way that blames the other person; this is not an apology: *“I’m sorry for yelling, but when you behave so badly, I have to yell.”*
- Keep it short and stop talking to let the other person respond.



Tip

Be honest with yourself about for what you are willing to apologize. For example, if your child says, *“You are being so mean,”* you don’t need to apologize for their interpretation. Instead, you can apologize for the impact – *“I can see you are hurt right now, and I am sorry. That was not my intention at all.”*



Trap

Avoid not paying attention to your own emotional regulation. You are always modeling. Kids develop the skills to deal with situations and regulate their own behaviors and emotions through what they see. When dealing with difficult situations, disappointment, and conflict, you are continually modeling for your child.

Closing

Intentional communication is a style of communicating where both parties get their needs met. It means communicating in a way that increases the likelihood that both parties truly hear each other. It has wide application and can be used in every interaction. When parents or those in a parenting role deliberately use intentional communication, they build their child's social and emotional skills. Engaging in intentional communication builds your skills as a parent or one in a parenting role and strengthens your relationship with your child.

Download and print the at-a-glance resource highlighting key information for [Intentional Communication for Children and Teens](#).

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Intentional Communication*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.



ParentingMontana.org was supported [in part] by CFDA 93.959 and 93.243 from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), and by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative (PDG B-5), Grant Number 90TP0026-01-00, from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and by the Montana State General Fund. The views and opinions contained do not necessarily reflect those of SAMHSA, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the Montana Department of Health and Human Services, and should not be construed as such.