

*Big Brothers Big Sisters*  
*Abbotsford Mission Ridge Meadows*  
**Mentor Learning Series**

**3**



***Communication Skills – Active Listening and Empathy***

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This module provides the learner with opportunities to increase their understanding and practice of positive communication skills to promote better understandings, reducing the potential for conflict, and helping to maintain positive relationships.



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## Introduction

Communication is the sending and receiving of information. When we communicate effectively, it promotes better understanding between us, reduces the potential for conflict, and helps us to maintain positive relationships.

We usually think of communication as being the words we speak, but it is much more than that. We communicate in other ways too:

- ❖ The para-verbal qualities
  - tone of voice
  - volume,
  - pace
  - inflection
  
- ❖ The non-verbal qualities
  - body language
  - facial expression
  - mannerisms
  - posture

In fact, we interpret the meaning of the speaker’s message much more through the para-verbal and non-verbal messages. When there is inconsistency between the words and the other qualities, we tend to believe the para and non verbal messages. For example, think of a time when you observed a friend frowning, muttering under their breath, sighing, and stomping around, and when you asked them what was wrong, the answer was “nothing!”. Did you believe the words, or the actions? In order to be effective communicators, we need to have congruence in our messages.

<b>Activity: Reflection</b>
Think of a time when you communicated very well with someone. What did you do that made that conversation go smoothly?
Think of a time when a conversation didn’t go well. What do you think happened that contributed to a lack of success? In retrospect, what would you have done differently?

In order to do this, we can learn specific communication skills that help us to listen and communicate well.

## Communication Skills at a Glance

SKILL	PURPOSE	TO DO THIS...
<b>Paraphrasing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Check your understanding of the speaker's message</li> <li>❖ To demonstrate that you heard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Restate the message in your own words</li> </ul>
<b>Empathizing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ To demonstrate your understanding of the meaning and feeling in the speaker's message</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Reflect your perception of the feelings and meaning</li> </ul>
<b>Clarifying/Questioning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ To get more information</li> <li>❖ To gain a deeper understanding and clarity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Ask open questions starting with how, what, when, where and who</li> </ul>
<b>"I" Language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ To express your own thoughts, feelings, interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Describe your experience without labels or judgment</li> </ul>
<b>Descriptive Language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ To convey experiences or behaviours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Describe specific, observable experiences using neutral language</li> </ul>
<b>Immediacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ To highlight a behaviour, emotion or dynamic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Describe what you see, hear, feel</li> </ul>
<b>Summarizing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ To pull together key points, interests, etc.</li> <li>❖ To finish one topic before moving on to another</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Recap main points</li> </ul>

## Active Listening

Sometimes we have listening challenges. How many of these bad habits have you been guilty of?

- ❖ Listening until we think we know what the problem is, then go inside our heads to think of solutions
- ❖ Listening to gather ammunition, so that we can shoot down the other person's point of view
- ❖ Being distracted by other events in our life that take up space in our minds and preoccupy us, making it difficult to listen
- ❖ Making assumptions and judgments that we filter the speaker's information through, so the message is hard to hear and understand
- ❖ Believing that the speaker is lying, or isn't worthy of our listening time

When we indulge in these bad habits, we are not truly listening to the speaker. It is hard to be curious about what someone is saying when we don't understand, or we disagree. Active listening is when we focus solely on the speaker, in an attempt to fully understand what they are trying to communicate. Active listening requires us to listen with positive intent.



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## ***Elements of Active Listening***

❖ **Set it up for success**

- Think about time and place – privacy, timing, power balancing, comfort

❖ **Focus on the speaker**

- Remove distractions – turn off cell phones, computers, TV's, etc.
- Be curious about what the speaker is trying to tell you – you don't have to agree with them, your goal is to understand them. Temporarily put aside your own thoughts in order to concentrate on the speaker

❖ **Show that you are listening**

- Be aware of your body language – open posture, no fidgeting, a look of openness and curiosity
- Use minimal encouragers – head nodding, “uh hmm”, etc.
- Be aware of tone and words – you want to communicate that what they have to say is important to you

❖ **Seek to understand**

- Listen for the meaning of the message, not just to the words
- Demonstrate that you heard what they were trying to say by providing feedback, both verbally and non verbally

## ***Why Use Active Listening?***

- ❖ People will tend to repeat themselves when they are not feeling heard. Active listening proves to them that you heard, so they will move on.
- ❖ You will have fewer misunderstandings and be able to sort differences out quickly
- ❖ Allowing the other to speak first may provide you with new information you didn't have before, which allows you to shift your point of view before creating a disagreement
- ❖ People are much more likely to be willing to listen to you once they have felt heard

## **Empathic Response**

An empathic response is made up of both of two communication skills - acknowledging feelings and paraphrasing content. The formula for an empathic response is:

*“You feel (emotion) about/because (content).”*



**BBBS Mentor Learning Series - 2007*****Reflecting Feelings***

There are different categories of feeling words and ranges of intensity to describe feelings. The objective is to get within the right category and close to level of intensity. Try to aim for the surface feeling, even if you sense a more profound emotion - going too deep too fast creates defensiveness in the speaker. Sometimes you may get a reaction to the word "feel" - you'll hear, "Don't tell me how I feel!" Simply substitute "you get, you are, you seem, you sound..." for the word "feel".

**Common Feeling Errors**

- ❖ Not tuning in to the correct feeling
- ❖ Not using a feeling word - "You feel like you're being taken advantage of."
- ❖ Minimizing the feeling - "You're a bit concerned"
- ❖ Identifying the underlying as opposed to surface feeling - going too deep
- ❖ Questioning - "So you were upset?"

***Paraphrasing***

Paraphrasing is saying back the essence of what you heard using your own words. It helps to gain understanding of the real meaning behind the words. It also helps the speaker clarify and organize their thoughts, plus it ensures understanding on your part. When you can paraphrase what the other person has said, they feel heard. Paraphrasing is a tracking skill. It involves saying back what you heard, in your own words, feeding back the main points and new information.

**Common Content Errors**

- ❖ No content, vague or inaccurate content, missing key information
- ❖ Editorializing - adding your opinion to content, adding your own information
- ❖ Advising - "if I were you, I'd..."
- ❖ Psychologizing - "you obviously have issues about ..."
- ❖ Criticizing - "you're just too sensitive"
- ❖ Parroting - repeating word for word
- ❖ Shifting focus off the speaker onto yourself "that happened to me once..."
- ❖ Sounding like you agree with the speaker's statements - "So, I'm an idiot."
- ❖ Asking a question - "You disagree with the committee's decision?"

**As a general rule:**

- ❖ If the feeling is strong and obvious, acknowledge the feeling.
- ❖ If the feeling isn't strong and you acknowledge it, it will feel like therapy - instead, paraphrase content.



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## Questions

### Closed Questions

These types of questions can be answered by "yes" or "no." Closed questions can be useful for focusing on a specific point of discussion: "Is this a good time for you to talk?" Most of the time in conflict, they tend to cause defensiveness and should be used carefully if at all.

Closed questions start with:

- ❖ *Can you...*
- ❖ *Can't you...*
- ❖ *Don't you think...*
- ❖ *Shouldn't you...*
- ❖ *Are you...*
- ❖ *Aren't you...*

Almost any closed question can be changed to an open question. If you are having difficulty shifting it, most likely it is a statement and it is better to state what you are trying to say. For example, if someone asks, "Don't you think that you should have asked for permission before using his office?" is really a judgment. "I think you should have asked for permission..."

### Open Questions

Open questions assist in identifying and clarifying issues and interests. They encourage a person to express his/her point of view, concerns etc. The speaker is encouraged to share more information and has the freedom to choose how to reply and what to disclose. Open questions help to build trust and openness in the discussion. They provide for the listener, more information and a deeper understanding of what is going on for the speaker. Open questions begin with:

- ❖ *What*
- ❖ *How*
- ❖ *When*
- ❖ *Where*
- ❖ *Who*
- ❖ *Why*

### Probes

Another type of inquiry is a probe. Although not a question, probes are useful in getting more information. They start with:

- ❖ *Tell me...*
- ❖ *Say more about...*



## Guidelines

### ***For Describing Behaviours***

❖ **Be Accurate**

Behaviour is what we see or hear, not what we interpret the behaviour to be. It is what you would experience if you were watching a video – the actions and the words, not the labels we put on the behaviours. Eg. "You ate three quarters of the pizza", not "you were being a pig".

❖ **Specify the Right Behaviour**

Be precise. This is difficult as the specific behaviour may be hard to pin-point.

❖ **Watch Inflammatory Language**

- *"When you neglected to tell anyone..."*
- *"When you insisted on having it your way..."*

The other party will focus on the inflammatory words and become defensive.

❖ **Watch the Use of Generalizations**

Words like "always" and "never" imply there are no exceptions to what you are describing. This is seldom the case.

❖ **Watch the Use of Adjectives and Adverbs**

Words like "constantly" and "absolutely" are non-specific and can create defensiveness in the other party. They are not specific and can lead to disagreements.

### ***For Disclosing Feelings***

❖ Be genuine in your disclosure of emotion - be honest.

❖ Tune in to your primary feeling - the first feeling you experience.

❖ Accurately express the degree of feeling you experience. Don't minimize or exaggerate how you feel.

❖ Avoid judgment-laden, attributive words that make assumptions about the other party's behaviour. For example:

- *"I feel abused"*
- *"I feel manipulated"*
- *"I feel taken advantage of"*



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<p><b>Activity: Responding Empathically</b> Write a response to each of the following statements using an empathic response.</p>
<p>1. <i>"You can't just come in here unannounced! I have a schedule too, you know!"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>2. <i>"I wish you wouldn't keep expecting me to be able to read your mind all the time."</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>3. <i>"It seems that every time I make a decision around here - somebody's got a gripe about it!"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>4. <i>"There's no way I ever agreed to that! Your notes must be wrong!"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>5. <i>"It's just plain stupid to end the meeting when were so close to finishing - Give me a break!"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>6. <i>"I know I said I could meet with you but things have come up. We'll have to postpone a week or so."</i> (this is the second time this has happened and the meeting is urgent from your perspective)</p>
<p> </p>
<p>7. <i>"I did all of the work last time! It's about time you got off your butt and helped out around here!"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>8. <i>"I told you that information in confidence – I didn't realize that you had such a big mouth!"</i></p>
<p> </p>



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<p><b>Activity: Open Questions</b></p> <p>Change each of these closed questions to open question. (If you can answer your new question with "yes" or "no", it is still a closed question.)</p>
<p>1. <i>"Don't you think that you might be over-reacting about this?"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>2. <i>"Are you going to be on time this time?"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>3. <i>"Is it ok to put this stuff here for now?"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>4. <i>"Are you listening to me?"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>5. <i>"Don't you want to go with her to the concert?"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>6. <i>"Is the report going to be ready in time for the meeting?"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>7. <i>"Do you want me to go over the details with you?"</i></p>
<p> </p>
<p>8. <i>"Is it alright if we change the date of the staff meeting to Tuesday?"</i></p>
<p> </p>



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<b>Activity: Active Listening</b>
With 1 – 2 partners, take turns actively listening and being curious while you explore these points of view. Your goal is to stay curious and find out more about the point of view – without challenging it in any way. No debating! No agreeing! No problem solving!
1. I think that all convicted drunk drivers should automatically be jailed for life.
2. University tuition should be free for everyone who wants to get a degree.
3. People should have to qualify for a license before they can have kids.
4. The legal drinking age in this province should be 17, since most kids are drinking by then anyways.
5. I think Canada should always remain neutral in world conflicts – we shouldn't be going to war to help countries like the United States.



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<b>Activity: Descriptive Language</b>	
Decide if each statement is a:	
❖ <u>D</u> escription	
❖ <u>J</u> udgment	
❖ <u>A</u> ssumption	
	Shelley was upset about the shift schedule changes - she had to re-arrange her vacation.
	I remember you saying that we were going to meet on Thursday and now you are telling me that we are scheduled for Monday.
	That presentation was excellent!
	Tony sure got ticked off with you when you told that joke in the meeting.
	My expectation is that we talk about expenditures before they are made.
	You acted unprofessionally when you yelled at Terri in the hallway in front of customers.
	You're not having much fun, are you?
	You have two of my files sitting on your desk that I have been looking for since Wednesday. I need for files to be returned to the central filing cabinet after they are used.



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<p><b>Activity: Communication Integration</b></p> <p>Work in pairs to practice paraphrasing and acknowledging skills</p>	
A:	strong feelings about something you believe to be true
B:	acknowledge message
A:	yes/no response
B:	goal is to achieve 3 yes answers
A:	statement about yourself you believe to be true
B:	acknowledge message
A:	yes/no
B:	goal is to achieve 3 yes answers
A:	statement about B you believe to be true
B:	acknowledge message
A:	yes/no
B:	goal is to achieve 3 yes answers
B:	strong feelings
A:	counterpoint to B
B:	acknowledge message
A:	yes/no
B:	goal is to achieve 3 yes answers



## Final Reflections

1. Refer back to the initial reflective exercise about a previous non productive conversation you had. After reviewing this module, how would you use these skills to have a more positive outcome if you were to have that conversation again?

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2. Is there a person you know who you think is a great communicator? What makes that person a good communicator?

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3. Are there people in your life whom you find more challenging to communicate effectively with? What do you think makes it more difficult to communicate with them? After reviewing this module, what can you change about your approach that may make a difference?

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4. How do you think you can incorporate these skills into your daily life? Where can you see yourself using them besides with your Little? How might your relationships change for the better?

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5. How will you be able to use these skills to build a positive relationship and communicate more effectively with your Little?

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## Taking It Back: Working with Your Little

Specific ideas to incorporate this module in your work with your Little:

### **Develop relationships**

Finding out about each other is an important step to building a trusting relationship with your Little. Balance active listening and self disclosure – go at a pace that is comfortable for the Little.

### **Manage conflict**

You can use the skills to work through disagreements or misunderstandings with each other. You can also model the skills to help the Little learn how to handle challenges in a more constructive way.

### **Encourage self reflection**

Active listening is an excellent way to assist your Little in becoming more self reflective. By hearing someone else reflect back what we say, we gain clarity and insight into our thoughts and emotions.

### **Build capacity**

By practicing these communication skills with your Little through role-play, you can assist in being able to communicate with more confidence.



## References and Further Resources

### **Books**

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk. A Faber, E Mazlish, 1980 New York; Avon Books

The Communications Skills Book. M McKay, M Davis, P Fanning, 1995 Oakland, CA; New Harbinger Publications

Everyday Encounters: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communications. J Wood, A Schweitzer, 2006 Toronto: Nelson

Assertiveness Skills. N. Shelton, S. Burton, 1995, New York: Viking

People Skills: How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others, and Resolve Conflicts. S. Bolton, 1979, New York: Simon & Schuster Inc.

Straight Talk. S. Miller, D. Wackman, E. Nunnally, C. Saline, 1982, New York: McGraw-Hill

Everyday Encounters: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication. J. Wood, A. Schweitzer, 2006, Toronto: Nelson

### **Websites**

Web resources for Communication Skills  
<http://www.khake.com/page66.html>

Mindtools Communication Skills Articles  
<http://www.mindtools.com/page8.html>

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills  
[http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=261&Itemid=130](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=261&Itemid=130)

Communication Skills (Face-to-Face)  
[http://www.managementhelp.org/commskls/cmm\\_face.htm](http://www.managementhelp.org/commskls/cmm_face.htm)

