Positive Family Communication

Patterns of communication within families (i.e. how family members communicate with one another), like other behaviours, are learnt over time.

The way we communicate within families can sometimes be helpful or unhelpful. This can sometimes contribute to the feelings of stress experienced by families.

Resilient families work together to talk openly and honestly; communicate clearly; value the opinions of one another; provide age appropriate information to children and young people within the family; and ask for help when needed.

There are six basic communication skills that can be used to facilitate positive family communication. They include:

1. **Level with a family member**: in a clear non-confrontational way tell the person exactly how you are feeling. Levelling involves giving the other person information about your thoughts and feelings, rather than expecting them to read your mind. It is important to regularly check that the other person has understood what it is you are saying.

   For example: *"I feel worried and frustrated when you don't take your medication because it is an important aspect of managing your illness."*

2. **Listen without speaking:** when listening to a family member talk, pay attention to what they are saying without thinking about what you are going to say next. Try not to challenge their point of view.

   For example: *"I'm here to support you and listen if you need someone to talk to."*

3. **Validate the point of view of a family member:** Let the family member know that you have heard them. It does not necessarily mean that you understand or even agree with their opinion. Just listen and respond in a caring manner.

   For example: *"I understand that it must be difficult at times to find the motivation to achieve your goals or accomplish everyday tasks."*

4. **Express your point of view through the use of "I" statements:** Sometimes we need to own our own thoughts or feelings. We can communicate this to our family members by using "I' statements such as: "I feel/think/want/need…."

   For example: *"I am concerned about how you have been feeling this past week."*

5. **Try saying 'no' sometimes:** We know that in reality it is very difficult to say 'no' to a family member, but we can all get better at it as long as we practice. The next time you say no try using the following strategy:
   - Acknowledge the other persons request;
   - Explain your reason for saying no; and
   - Just say NO.

   For example: *"I know you would like me to give you $20 (acknowledgement), but I gave you $20 this morning and I have already given you a lot of money over the last week (explanation), so I can't give you any more now (saying 'No')."*

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6. **Become more assertive:** as a parent of a child with a diagnosed illness, a lot of your time will be spent acting as a 'middle-man' between your child and paid professionals such as doctors, nurses, teachers and respite workers. It is important that you and your child are treated with courtesy, respect and given the right information to make good decisions.

Being assertive means you:

- express your view, your thoughts and feelings clearly and calmly in a way that is honest and respectful;
- stand up for your own and others' rights;
- let other people express their opinions equally.

Learning to be assertive is like learning anything new – it takes time, practice and patience. Give yourself credit for times when you are more assertive and tell yourself to stick with it if there are times you aren't as assertive as you had planned.

The Centre for Clinical Interventions has a good online resource to help improve assertiveness. There are modules you can read and work through in sequence. You can find it at http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au.

Click on "Resources" and follow the links to "Assert Yourself!

TRY TO	TRY NOT TO
Clearly say what you want or how you feel	Apologise excessively or over-justify your view
Speak calmly	Shout or invade the other person's space
Take a deep breath if you need to gather your thoughts	Use aggressive body language – pointing at them, pulling faces, waving your hands
Respectfully explain what you would like to be different	Take a long time to get to the point
Give the other person a chance to express their views	Dominate the conversation or interrupt
Focus on the problem not the person	Criticise the other person's character
Be aware of your body language – use appropriate facial gestures, remain relaxed, maintain a comfortable level of eye contact	Make commitments you can't keep

For a list of local and national family support services go to www.himh.org.au/familysupport

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CHiRP
Support for your family

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