# Communicating With Parents: Module 2

## Module 2 - Speaking and Listening Respectfully

*Outcomes*
As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:
**Identify the basic elements of successful communications, and**
**Demonstrate conversation techniques that convey respect and build understanding.**

*Key Concepts*
**Conveying respect is at the heart of all successful communications.**
**Speaking carefully and listening well are both critical to effective communication.**
**Staff can build upon and refine their use of basic communication techniques to make their conversations with parents open and productive.**

## Background Information

Conversations between and among parents, staff, and children form the heart of communication in the Head Start community. Good conversations help form productive, satisfying relationships.

For conversations to work this way, however, they must convey respect as well as exchange information. In fact, **a conversation is sometimes more important for how it creates a climate of mutual respect, than for how it conveys information or meets short-term goals.**

Staff members can become more effective in their communication with parents by being aware of the ways that they show respect for parents in their daily conversations. They also can become more effective communicators by becoming skilled in several techniques that are covered in this module. These are:

**Using communication helpers**
**Listening well**
**Giving appropriate feedback**
**Using "I" messages**

Like tools on a tool belt, these communication techniques are tools that a person can "pick up" and use as appropriate in various conversational settings. As with any tools, using these techniques skillfully takes practice. One must learn to recognize the appropriate moment for using each tool, and one must be able to apply them naturally and sincerely.

For some Head Start staff, the techniques covered in this module may be new concepts. For others who have been through communication skills workshops before, the techniques may be quite familiar. This module, however, gives all participants a chance to refine their use of these communication tools in the particular context of their communications with parents.

## Process

Four critical issues for promoting respectful communication:

**How do we show respect for the other person in a conversation?**

1. **By giving people time to form thoughts, to respond, and to complete their statements.**
2. **By focusing on the concern that the other person is expressing.**
3. **By letting the other person begin the conversation or do a lot of the talking.**

**How do we help keep a conversation open and moving forward?**
By using:

1. **Door Openers** ("Would you like to talk about it?" or "You seem upset.")
2. **Encouragers** ("I'd like to hear more about what you think." or "I'm here if you want to talk over your ideas.")
3. **Open Questions** ("What do you hope for in offering to serve on the Policy Council?" or "What are some of your ideas for our classroom?")
4. **Nodding, saying "yes" or "no" or "I hear you." or "uh-huh" or "Tell me more."**
5. **Facial and body expressions that show interest.**

**What should we avoid doing so that we don't block the progress of a conversation?**

1. **Blaming** ("We wouldn't be in this situation if you hadn't ...")
2. **Saying "always" or "never"** ("My son always loses the papers you send home.")
3. **Name-calling or labeling** ("You're such a workaholic.")
4. **Giving advice or commentary** ("If I were in your shoes I would ..." or "Something just like that happened to my sister. She ...")
5. **Lecturing or threatening** ("Prompt medical attention is very important." or

"This will be your child's last week here unless you provide us with completed immunization forms.")

6. **Avoiding or belittling another's concern** ("It's really not that bad.")
7. **Facial and body expressions that show lack of interest.**

**What cultural and personal factors do we need to take into account when we are having a conversation with someone?**

1. **Each family may have its own ways of communicating.** For example, in some families someone other than the parent (an elder, family member or community member) may be the key contact for family issues.
2. **Body language varies among cultures.** For example, different cultures make different use of eye contact, physical distance between speakers, and unspoken gestures.
3. Consider the **physical arrangement between all of the people in your conversation** so that everyone shares control. Be aware of how this factor can affect a conversation if, for example, one person is behind a desk, at the head of the table or standing above the other. Also be aware of the seating arrangements for group conversations. Are staff and parents seated together or separately? Would the parties to the conversation feel more comfortable sitting in a circle of chairs rather than in rows?
4. Remember that **people have different learning styles**. For some people, being told information is not the best way for them to receive information. Hands-on demonstrations, handouts or visuals may work better for them.
5. **Everyone has a culture.** Being aware of your own cultural lens through which you view the world is as important as trying to understand others.

**Exercise**

Read the following conversation and identify *conversation helping* remarks by the staff and *conversation blocking* remarks by the staff.

**Staff:**     Good morning, Mr. Brown! You look so happy this morning.
**Parent:**     Oh, hi there, Miss Pratt. I'm just pleased with how excited Jacob is when I bring him here.
**Staff:**     He does love it. I know he's looking forward to kindergarten this fall.
**Parent:**     Yeah, so am I, pretty much.
**Staff:**     Pretty much?
**Parent:**     To tell the truth, I am a little worried about something.
**Staff:**     Can I help?
**Parent:**     I just don't know what to do to make sure he's ready for kindergaraten. I'm not a trained teacher.
**Staff:**     You know in the parents' room we have take-home activities for you to do with your son. In fact, I'm looking for some volunteers to help me put together some new activities.
**Parent:**     See, one of my nieces is in kindergarten and her mother said

she's not doing so well.
**Staff:**    Oh?
**Parent:**    The teacher says she's immature for her age or something.
**Staff:**    Immature?
**Parent:**    (shaking his head): The teacher seemed to think she's going to have to repeat kindergarten.
**Staff:** Well, I stayed back in the third grade and it didn't hurt me. I wouldn't worry about it.
**Parent:**    (looking away): I don't want Jacob to be held back!
**Staff:**    Do you want me to show you those take-home activities now?
**Parent:**    Huh? No, that's Okay - see you later, Miss Pratt.

| Identify each statement, from the Exercise, as a Conversation Helping or Conversation Blocking statement. | |
|---|---|
| 1. ☐ Conversation Helping <br> ☐ Conversation Blocking | **"Pretty much?"** |
| 2. ☐ Conversation Helping <br> ☐ Conversation Blocking | **"Can I help?"** |
| 3. ☐ Conversation Helping <br> ☐ Conversation Blocking | **"You know in the parents' room we have take-home activities for you to do with your son. In fact, I'm looking for some volunteers to help me put together some new activities."** |
| 4. ☐ Conversation Helping <br> ☐ Conversation Blocking | **"Oh?"** |

| 5. | ☐ Conversation Helping<br>☐ Conversation Blocking | "Immature?" |
|---|---|---|
| 6. | ☐ Conversation Helping<br>☐ Conversation Blocking | " Well, I stayed back in third grade and it didn't seem to hurt me. I wouldn't worry about it." |
| 7. | ☐ Conversation Helping<br>☐ Conversation Blocking | " Do you want me to show you those take-home activities now?" |

## Process

Obviously one of the critical skills involved in communication is listening. One way to show that you are listening is by offering feedback. By giving feedback, you confirm to the other person that he or she is being heard and understood. It provides a means for the other person to clarify statements if they are not understood correctly. It also enables the other person to reflect on what they have been saying, which can help them move forward in problem-solving.

What is required of you to be a good listener?

Three essential elements of listening:

1. You must be **open** to the conversation - that is, you must be willing, and appear willing, to listen.
2. You must **pay attention**. Paying attention helps you focus on what is said, and it lets the other person know you are really listening.
3. You must **offer feedback**. By restating what you hear the other person say, you let the other person know that you are truly listening. Feedback also confirms to that person that you properly understood. Finally, feedback allows the other person to reflect on what he or she has said.

Providing feedback is effectively done in three different ways depending upon the purpose of the feedback:

**Factual feedback is best used when someone tells you something factual, without much emotion.** *(Examples of statements that need factual feedback.)*

- "My daughter is not acting like herself lately."
- "I don't think I passed by GED test."
- "My landlord told me he's going to sell our house."

**Emotional feedback is best used when someone shows emotion as they tell you something.** *(Examples of statements that need emotional feedback.)*

- "She's driving me crazy."
- "The thought of taking that test again makes me sick."
- "I'm so tired of moving."

**Solution-focused feedback is best used when someone is telling you about a problem and trying to find a solution.** Note, however, that it is not your job to find solutions to other people's problems, but rather, to reflect back the speaker's own ideas. Also, solution-focused feedback only works after, or in combination with, plenty of factual and emotional feedback. *(Examples of statements that need solution-focused feedback.)*

- "Maybe she should go live with her grandmother for a while."
- "I don't know if I should keep trying or not."
- "I want to buy my own place."

| | **Read the following statments, identify what type of feedback would be appropriate.** | |
|---|---|---|
| 8. | ☐ Factual<br>☐ Emotional<br>☐ Solution-focused | **"I really don't like having to pick up my child by 3 o'clock."** |
| 9. | ☐ Factual<br>☐ Emotional<br>☐ Solution-focused | **"My car battery died."** |
| 10. | ☐ Factual<br>☐ Emotional<br>☐ Solution-focused | **"It really upsets me that my daughter cannot tie her shoes."** |

| 11. | ☐ Factual<br>☐ Emotional<br>☐ Solution-focused | **"I think I want to move my son the DISD preschool program."** |
|---|---|---|
| 12. | ☐ Factual<br>☐ Emotional<br>☐ Solution-focused | **"Jeremy fell and scratched his elbow this morning."** |

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**Process**

Another major part of communications is what is called "I" messages. The opposite of an "I" message is a communication blocker called a "you" message. In a "you" message the communicator attributes feelings or motivations to another person rather than stating their own feelings or motivations. "You" messages tend to turn people off because they feel blamed, attacked or pigeonholed. This will automatically put the other person on the defensive, and can be a major detour from open communications.

Examine your reaction to the two messages that follow:

- "When my son tells me other kids are picking on him, I feel worried about his safety and happiness here. I want to meet with you to discuss ways to keep him safe."
- "You're letting the other kids pick on my son."

What is your reaction to the first message? The second? Which message is more likely to engage you in a respectful, problem-solving communication? As you notice, **an "I" message identifies a potential problem, and communicates the person's concern, but at the same time it does not dictate to the listener what they feel, believe, etc. "I" messages allow the other person to be open and be him/herself.**

There are usually three part to an "I" message:

1. **Describe the situation, concern, what happened, or what might happen.**
2. **Describe your feeling about it.**
3. **Describe what you would like to happen or what you believe is a**

**solution.**

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| Read the following statments, identify if it is an "I" message or a "You" message. | | |
|---|---|---|
| **13.** | ☐ "I" message<br>☐ "You" message | **"I'm concerned about Jeremy hitting other children."** |
| **14.** | ☐ "I" message<br>☐ "You" message | **"You don't like the way I am teaching."** |
| **15.** | ☐ "I" message<br>☐ "You" message | **"You did not show up for our meeting yesterday."** |
| **16.** | ☐ "I" message<br>☐ "You" message | **"My feelings about the situation are kind of confusing."** |
| **17.** | ☐ "I" message<br>☐ "You" message | **"I don't think you show enough respect for yourself."** |

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**1-CH, 2-CH, 3-CH, 4-CH, 5-CH, 6-CB, 7-CB, 8-E, 9-F, 10-E, 11-S, 12-S, 13-I, 14-Y, 15-Y, 16-I, 17-Y**