



## **PROVEN WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR KIDS**

By: Ken Canfield

I have no idea what's going on inside that boy's head!" "My little girl and I don't have much in common. What do I say to her?" "Why even try? My teens won't listen to me anyway." Communicating with your children can be one of your greatest challenges as a father.

But just imagine your children *looking forward* to sharing their lives with you; imagine them *wanting* to hear your opinions on a particular issue; imagine feeling comfortable discussing *anything* with your kids. That's the potential of positive communication!

### **Listening is in... Lecturing is out**

The media trademark of the sensitive dad has been the wise and caring lecture, from Hugh Beaumont to Robert Young, clear up to Bill Cosby taking one of the kids into the kitchen for some apple juice and some hard truth. We've let the lecture become our stock and trade. It's what we aspire to: that one eloquent and learned speech which teaches our kids the secrets of life.

There is certainly room for a well-timed lecture, but also realize that quite often our children don't need our answers, and they don't need us mentally rehearsing our answers while they are speaking. They need the comfort of knowing we're there for them--and that isn't a result of wise lectures.

Seek first to understand--whether you're settling a dispute, offering comfort and counsel or just talking at the dinner table. Attentive

listening leads to understanding--a priceless commodity between a father and his children. It *informs* you in your fathering tasks and, perhaps more importantly, *expresses* your unconditional love for your kids.

Your daughter comes to you feeling uneasy about entering middle school in the fall. What do you do? You could simply tell her that middle school is nothing to worry about and millions of people have passed through relatively unharmed--but that wouldn't meet her immediate need. She needs to know that her father loves her and believes in her, no matter what happens during the next school year. We show our love and concern by *listening*.

### **Learn to disagree without starting WWII**

We hear a lot of talk about diversity these days--we should learn to appreciate people who are different than we are. But you probably never thought about diversity in your own household.

Of course, you won't want to give a toddler much room to disagree with you. But it's inevitable that your children will make choices with which you won't always agree, from how they spend their money, to the friends they choose, to the mates they choose, even to their basic philosophies of life.

You can disagree and still maintain an atmosphere of acceptance by learning to appreciate your children's unique gifts and perspectives. Expect their opinions to change from time to time, but be unchanging in giving respect to what they have to say. Avoid making heavy-

handed dictates that leave no room for discussion; demonstrate that you do understand, and then state your case by saying, "The way I see it ..." or "From my experience ...."

You *are* the head of the household, but your children will be much more cooperative if they know Dad is willing to yield on some points. A good rule of thumb for disagreements may be to ask yourself, "Will this still be important to us three years from now?" If not, why cause any damage over it now?

### **Actions really do speak louder than words**

We think of communication as verbal, and that is the kind most dads need to work on. But a father's *actions* go hand in hand with what he says.

One son gets punished by his father for sneaking out to an R-rated movie, but then one day finds his dad's adult magazines hidden in a drawer. Few things cause more confusion in children than fathers who spout moral absolutes and then live out a double standard.

Or there's the girl who hears her dad talk about obeying the laws of the land, and when he is driving on vacation she notices that the speedometer hovers right around 65. This father is teaching his daughter that there are clearly defined boundaries--some things are good and right, and some are not.

No matter what you *tell* your children, the life you *live* communicates what you're really made of.

### **Be open, honest and positive**

As we communicate who we are and what we believe to our growing children, *method* is everything. We need to be open, honest and positive.

Open honesty tells you *what* to communicate. It means having those "hard talks" when you know you need to, whether you're dealing with sexual issues, confronting a child about some-thing he has done, or humbly asking for forgiveness when you have wronged him. Open honesty is carrying through on the responsibilities you have to those you love.

A positive approach determines *how* you communicate. When your child succeeds at something or shows kindness to someone else, encouragement is the natural response. But being positive gets harder when she makes a mistake or is insensitive to others.

Too many fathers react by insulting or shaming their children, but we need to affirm them in everything, even when correction is our ultimate goal. There is *always* a positive way to talk to your child. There may not be a big difference in the point being made, but to the child, a positive response makes all the difference in the world.

Effective communication demands large amounts of undivided attention, as well as creativity, perseverance and sometimes even courage.

But the ultimate question is not *will* we communicate with our children, but rather will we use communication to build them up or tear them down? Will our actions turn them against us, or will they validate and reinforce what we say? That's the true challenge of communication.

Added: March 08, 2007 at 04:24 PM | Updated: July 23, 2008 at 09:46 AM