**IMPROVE YOUR AND YOUR CHILD'S COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

A word "communication" is derived from a Latin word "communis" meaning communal, and „communicaio“, meaning information, notification. Thus, when people attempt to communicate they try to establish “community” with an individual or a group and also transmit a communication message. Good communication improves the quality of relationship.

Functions of communication are: (1) development of intellectual processes; (2) adaptation to the environment, and (3) manipulation of the environment, or asserting influence on the environment in which we live. Communication knowledge and experience are created as part of the interaction (communication) between children on one hand, and members of their family, other significant adults and peers on the other hand. Successful communication in the family has a positive effect on the development of the social relationships of children with their peers. Furthermore, the relationships that children build with people are necessary to help them face fear, frustrations, stress, loneliness and other challenges that they are bound to encounter in the course of their personal growth, which contributes to developing resilience in children.

This is why communication is one of the most important experiences that adults can provide to children. Through daily interactions, both children and adults can develop a relationship that helps children learn about the world and about themselves. One of the most important disciplines to create this relationship is the development of communication skills.

The development of efficient interpersonal communication skills is important for two reasons:

1. in terms of prevention, efficient interpersonal communication skills will provide a range of development advantages to children in areas such as learning, caring for themselves and others, creating quality relationships with peers and significant adults, and positive identity;
2. in high-risk situations (for example rejection by peers), the ability to be assertive and to use useful and effective communication skills may significantly help children preserve their own integrity and stand up for themselves, confide and seek protection.

Efficient listening skills, showing empathy, giving feedback, communicating ideas and assertive behaviour determine a child's relationship within a peer group. As they grow, children become increasingly responsible for this relationship. In order to build a loving and trusting relationship, the child's significant adults must also possess these communication skills.

Children that grow up with adults who know how to listen actively, who have empathy and give children appropriate feedback about their behaviour that stimulates development are provided with the opportunity to learn about themselves and others without feeling guilty and inadequate.

Simultaneously, they get the message about their and their family's and group's values and about how to behave in order to live and preserve these values. It is also important to develop the children's skills of giving effective feedback because in this way we allow children to express themselves clearly and send others the message about what they need and expect from them.

Developing children's skills is a lot easier if more people around them show how to behave in a certain situation and react in a proper way. That's why it is important to establish a partnership with your child's educator/teacher. As programmes for developing skills important for children's resilience are already being implemented at kindergartens/schools, it is of great significance that you cooperate and follow the given instructions. That way, you won't be the only one assuming responsibility, because you have educated partners in your child's upbringing. On top of that, believe it or not, your child's resilience strengthens your own resilience as well!

Development of efficient interpersonal communication skills is possible when there is a balance of skills in listening and understanding others on the one hand and the skills in expressing and standing up for oneself on the other hand.

LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING THE OTHERS

As much as adults are an appropriate role model for active listening, children cannot master this skill without specific practice, because, as was said before, effective listening requires one to focus on the other person, and not on oneself – which in early childhood and preschool age does not come spontaneously to a child. Therefore it is good to combine active listening with self-expression and the expression of personal preferences in various games and activities.

EFFECTIVE LISTENING

***Efficient listening skills*** enable children to get to know, understand and accept other persons. When listening efficiently, a child focuses on the other person, which in a way reduces consciousness about his or her own state of mind and stream of thoughts (Bašić et al., 1994). This is a demanding skill even for adults, but is also an important requirement for learning the skill of giving and receiving feedback and understanding feelings of others. In a relationship in which adults possess effective listening skills, children will experience that other people care about what they think, need and feel, they will have enough time to express their needs or their problem, and will have the opportunity of being sincere and will more easily and simply turn for help in the future.

EVERY DAY

Parents mention different verbal and non-verbal signs indicating that their child is listening to them: *there's eye contact, the child is focused on what I am saying, the child tends to repeat my words, the child asks questions and prompts further discussion about the topic or simply the child's behavior makes it clear that he or she has heard and acknowledged what I have said*.

There are many situations when the child is doing something by itself and we shouldn't insist on making the child listen to us if it is not very important. It is essential that the child pays attention when we believe that the matter is really important – for us or the child.

It is extremely important that the child listens to the adult when:

the parents express their needs

the parents set child's boundaries regarding others

it is a matter of child's safety

For example:

* *It's been a hard day at work today and I have a headache. I have to get some rest. I will be with you in your room (if this is a preschooler) and you should play quietly and not ask me anything. What are you going to do while I am taking my rest?*
* *Peter, I am really interested in what you have to say, but right now I cannot listen to you carefully because I want to see the news. Please be patient and as soon as the news is over I will listen to you and we can talk about whatever you want. Can you do that? What are you going to do while I am watching the news?*
* *The ice is too thin and it is dangerous to walk on it. Would you like to throw this big rock on the ice and check? I know that you like skating and that it would be exciting and I can see that you are angry now. You can be angry, but there will be no ice-skating here. What other things could we do?*

When parents express themselves clearly and set clear boundaries, the child is given an opportunity to get to know its parents *(‘’It's like that with my mum’’).* The way the child behaves towards our statements depends on us – we are responsible for that.

We should communicate with the child in accordance with its temperament, intellectual level and life experience. That is, it is up to us to make sure that the child listens, understands and acknowledges us.

It is important to remember that the right to be heard by another person is best established when we listen to and acknowledge that person.

It is particularly important that parents listen to their children in situations when they

express their emotions, needs and problems

want to share their experience, observations or ideas with the parents

ask questions about something or somebody

For example:

* *“Mum I’m afraid, somebody is under my bed!”*

Instead of telling the child “*There’s nothing to be afraid of”,* it would be better to turn on a lamp and take a look under the bed together with your child. Listening to somebody doesn’t only mean hearing them, but also responding to the needs they express. In this case, we aren’t negating fear, we are reducing it by exploring the dark.

* *“Promise me you won’t be telling our guests anymore about the funny things I said when I was little.”*

If we find something amusing and witty, it doesn’t mean our children will feel the same way about it. They could feel embarrassed and after such statement the only thing we could say is “*I’m sorry and I’ll be more careful next time”.*

* *“Look at me, I’m swimming without floaties!”*

Instead of exclaiming with alarm “*Be careful, it’s too deep!” it* is enough to wave at the child, smile and say *“I can see you*!”

* *“The new music teacher is a little bit strange.”*

Such a statement provides an opportunity to exchange impressions with a child: “*You think so? I’ve met her and she seems very interesting to me. What makes you think she’s strange?”* Not only should we listen to the child’s impressions, but we should also respect them if we want the child to continue expressing its opinions freely.

* *“Dad, have you got a deceased grandpa?”*

You might get confused by such question, but your 5-year-old needs an answer so that the conversation could continue. For example: “*Yes, I have.” “And has mum got a deceased grandpa?” “ Yes, mum has one as well.” “And me?” “No, your grandpa is alive.”*

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| **Questions** | **Unsuitable answers** |
| Why are you always angry with me? | Who’s angry?!! |
| Why is this thing red? | Because it is! |
| Is there anything sweet? | There’s an apple! |
| Why do girls wear pink and boys blue? | You’ll understand when you grow up. |
| Why does the Moon follow us? | You’ll learn that at school. |
| What are interest rates? | Ask your dad. |
| Why can my sister do it, and I can’t? | You will know when you become a mum. |

A real-life situation: It’s summer. 6-year-old Hana and her heavily pregnant mum are in a park. It’s been 2 hours of play and fun, so the mother is tired and would like to go home. At that moment, Hana’s best friend arrives to the park. The mother warns the girls they can play for half an hour and then Hana will have to go home. Half an hour later Hana does not want to go home and strongly objects. The mother is tired and insists that they go. On the way home Hana says: “*I hate you.”* The mother feels unhappy and starts to cry.

Instead of this, the conversation could have gone in another direction. *“Oh, so you say you hate me? You must be very angry?” “Yes, I am angry.” “I understand your anger because I know how much you like playing with Megi. I am very tired, my legs are swollen and I cannot stay in the park anymore. We could arrange that Megi comes to our place tomorrow.”*

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UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONS IN COMMUNICATION

An empathetic person invests conscious effort to share the other person's feelings, as well as to precisely understand the situation of the other person, including this person's thoughts and feelings and what causes them. It is important to make a distinction between this ability and sympathy, which implies commiseration with another person, and which manifests itself in experiencing emotions similar to this person's emotions. *Empathy for the feelings of others*appears between the ages of two and three. Children become aware that other people have their own feelings, which are different from theirs, they more appropriately respond to signs that show other people's feelings, and they are capable of feeling "compassion" or global sympathy. It is important to mention that empathy is the basis for conscious behaviour that has a positive effect on other people, and which includes charity, helping others to meet their needs, removing difficulties, kindness, graciousness, material assistance and moral support. These are life skills which can be prompted by additional practice, and which contribute to the development of resilience in a child and in the community in which this child lives.

EVERY DAY

Parents can notice that their children at a very early age become worried if a family member is in some kind of pain, their eyes brim with tears if their sibling or parent cries, they laugh when everyone else laughs even though they don't always understand what is funny. Those are the signs that children recognize and react to the feelings of people related to them. In order for the family members to be able to support each other, it is important to move from the WE level (because we all feel similarly) to YOU and I level (I can see you're having a hard time – how can I help you?).

We can encourage the child to make an effort to understand other people's feelings, moods, thoughts and their situation when:

* meeting people in need (an older neighbour that needs help, a tearful child in a park, a lost dog, a blind person on a pedestrian crossing, a woman with a baby queuing in a supermarket...)
* a family member is faced with a particular situation (a mother in a hurry to work looking for her car keys, a sister who lost her mobile phone, a brother who lost an important match, a pet who hurt...)
* something bad happens to somebody at kindergarten or school

Parents often find themselves in a situation when, together with their children, they can witness these things happening. Then they should not only try to understand the feelings and the position of others and help them, but they should also talk about that with their children and encourage them to act in accordance with their age and abilities. While doing so, it is important to protect the reputation and dignity of the person they are helping.

A real-life situation: 9-year-old Marko and his mother are walking around the town. Marko sees an older man playing the violin with an open violin case in front of him. The boy suddenly turns to his mother, takes some of his own money from his pocket and asks her to give it to the man. The mother, thrilled by the child's gesture, says: ''That is your money, you should give it yourself.'' The boy grows uneasy and says: ''Come on Mum, how would an older man feel if a child gave him money.''

In this example, who was the one that wanted to help and who was the one that along with wanting to help, understood the emotions and position of another person?

SOMETIMES

Besides everyday situations in which you are the child's model for understanding other people's feelings and positions and in which you encourage the child to understand and help others, you must have been given some tasks at kindergarten or school in order to practice this skill additionally.

On particular family occasions you can:

* comment on the behaviour of a protagonist in a film, picture-book or book that you are reading or watching with your child
* analyze and decide how to behave when family members find themselves in a difficult situation (visiting an ill family member, job loss, failing a subject at the end of the school year...)
* comment on the situations a child learns about through the media and discuss how the society helps strangers, and how family, kindergarten, school or child can help (floods, earthquakes, refugees, fires...)

A real-life situation: Your 10-year-old daughter gets home from school and tells you that you will receive a call from her teacher for sure because something bad has happened at school.

Although you feel like saying *''I can imagine you've been chatting again during class, disturbing others, and when the teacher warned you, you made a face and the whole class laughed*.'', it is much better TO EXPRESS INTEREST IN THE EVENT, LISTEN, UNDERSTAND AND SHOW EMPATHY.

A real-life situation: Your 4-year-old got a much desired and expensive toy (a remote controlled car) for his birthday. He insists on taking it to his kindergarten to show it to his friends. You warn him that the toy might get broken if too many children press the buttons. You pick up your son at the kindergarten and find him sobbing bitterly, holding the broken toy and telling you what has happened.

Although you would like best to say *''I told you that was not a good idea. It serves you right when you don't do as I tell you, “it* is much better to LISTEN, UNDERSTAND AND SHOW EMPATHY.

Hear the child out, don't interrupt him and give him a hug while he's talking. While you are listening to his story about the event say things such as *''Oh I see, I understand, I can imagine how you feel, such a pity...''*

As the child is already having a hard time, your disapproval would only increase the child's feeling of loneliness and lack of understanding. Now more than ever, the child needs your support.

An old Chinese proverb says: ''Love me even when I make mistakes – it is then that I need your love most''.

After the child calmed down, it is possible to bring up the subject of the child who participated in the game and who is to ''blame'' for the broken toy. *What do you think, how does Petar feel now? Did you notice his reaction when he saw that the car was broken? What did he say to you? What did you say to him? What will happen tomorrow at kindergarten?*

COMMUNICATING IDEAS; COOPERATION; NEGOTIATION

Communication does not stop when we send the message and when the person it was intended for responds to it. On the contrary, this is only the beginning, which leads to **learning how to communicate ideas**. Two-way communication in terms of content contains plenty of messages about what the participants are thinking, feeling and intending. In relationship terms, this means giving importance to what the other person is saying, showing interest by asking questions about the ideas and intentions of the interlocutor, and feeling free to express one's own ideas and intentions. The communication of ideas offers positive opportunities to develop awareness about one's own contribution, which leads to fulfillment of the need for power, or appreciation. This shows children that they are not helpless and abandoned to depend on other people's ideas and other people's will.

EVERY DAY

Regardless their age, every child has a range of ideas about what they want and what is important to them: when it comes to playing, clothes, presents food and so on. Every child has an idea even about an ideal day or ideal family. However, we cannot know much about that if we are not open to and interested in children’s thoughts and ideas and if we do not react with consideration.

We are there to show that different attitudes do not necessarily end in conflict.

There are a number of occasions in family life when one can hear other person's opinion and express one's own and make agreements. We can communicate ideas about:

* the issues that are at the center of child's current interests
* everyday situations that make it easier for the family to function (transport, meals time, chores distribution, pets care...)
* cooperation with school or kindergarten (meeting the obligations that school or kindergarten requires from family members, supporting the child in their school or kindergarten activities...)

It is extremely important to give priority to child's own ideas, when they concern the child itself. In that case the parent should only make sure that the circumstances won't endanger the child's health and reputation.

* *You want to wear this princess dress to the kindergarten today? It is cold outside and you can wear it if you put on a warm sweater and pants beneath the dress. Are you sure it will be comfortable for you to play in it?*



* *You have tennis, dance and Spanish classes and now you would like to take up guitar lessons as well? Are you sure you can handle all those activities? I have to know what days guitar lessons are and if you need something from us (money, transport...).* If the additional activity does not require parents' commitment, then it is really up to the child to decide if they can do it. If it does require parents' commitment, then you have to discuss it.

SOMETIMES

Besides everyday situations in which you and your child communicate ideas, you must have been given some tasks at kindergarten or school in order to practice this skill additionally. Discuss and make arrangements on how a task should be done, who will participate in it and how.

On particular family occasions you can exchange ideas about:

* how to help a family member to weather a change in life (a new job, starting university, kindergarten or school, living in separation...)
* where to go on vacation, how to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries or the New Year's....
* how to renovate an apartment or house, what to name a new family member, which pet to get, which family car to buy (or at least what colour)

Be careful when exercising democracy. Sometimes parents allow the child to decide where to go on holiday, what to name a pet or which car to buy, but after an interesting and heated debate, the parent assumes the right to make the final decision. It is advisable to make a distinction between asking the child for advice (and making it clear right away that you will make the final decision, but are still interested in other people's opinions) and being ready and willing to negotiate and vote.

A real-life situation: Your 8-year-old daughter comes from school in a very bad mood. She is angry with her best friend, who sits with her. They were doing an exam in Croatian and she let her friend copy her answers. The teacher saw the same answers and because of the same wrong answer he realized they had been copying. Both of the girls got a negative remark in the register. Your daughter expected her friend to admit she was the one who copied the answers, but that did not happen.

Adults tend to comment and pass a ''judgment'' right away, sticking to one possibility only.

When you listen carefully and with interest, it helps the child to solve the problem and it opens up more possibilities. What can be done so that the girlfriends remain girlfriends?

What could her friend do to show that she cares about their friendship, in spite of the fact that she did not ''confess'' she was the one who copied the answers?