



Caregivers: How to Keep Lines of Communication Open

There are many things that parents and other adults can do to open the lines of communication between themselves and the important children in their lives. Making it safe for children to talk can help keep them safe from harm and can give them a means to let others know if they've been harmed. Here are suggestions for what to do to open and maintain the lines of communication between yourself and the children in your world.

- **Children need to know that they are heard in order to feel safe communicating.**
Listen when a child talks to you. Use eye contact directed at the child. Stop whatever important "adult thing" you are doing and devote your attention to the child. These steps convey that what the child said was heard, that the child is important and what he or she has to say is important, too. When a child knows that you'll listen, he or she is more likely to talk to you when important, scary, or confusing issues arise.
- **Children need to know that their feelings are validated.**
When a child shares his or her feelings, it is important to communicate to the child that those feelings are valid. Sometimes children have feelings about something that is difficult for adults to believe. For example, young children may be afraid of monsters. Grown-ups "know" that monsters don't exist and so may be tempted to discount the fact that the child feels afraid. Even if a child makes a statement that does not appear real (like believing in monsters), the feelings that the child experiences are real. Acknowledge those feelings. Let the child know that you are there for him or her when they feel scared or sad or angry or happy. This will encourage the child to continue to share feelings. In other circumstances, children may want to discuss a real situation that is stressful for them. Make sure you validate your child's feelings before offering solutions.
- **Children need to know that you can hear whatever it is they have to say, no matter how difficult.**
Children will be more likely to communicate with adults who they know can handle what they need to say without becoming overwhelmed by the adults' feelings. If a child chooses to share something difficult with you, such as bullying at school, thank the child for talking with you. Comment on how brave the child was for sharing. Sometimes a child will only share part of something on his or her mind to see how you will react. Children are very protective of the adults who are important to them and may not want to share something that would make the adult upset. The more you can let the child know that communicating can be difficult and that he or she did a great job at it, the more the child will continue to communicate in the future.

