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This time of year was my dad's favorite. He loved family and food and when the two came together, he was most certainly in his element. Although he died of heart disease when I was a mere 20 years old, I remember waking up Thanksgiving to the smells of his menu and the sounds of his work in the kitchen. He was an amazing cook and a great counselor.

One of his many wise phrases was, "Charlie (his nickname for me), there is a reason we were made with two ears and only one mouth." Many times this phrase was directed solely towards me, but other times he would say this phrase when we heard someone else losing the communication balance – assuming that they should talk more than listen.

I think this is a great time of year to revisit that phrase. As families and friends get together, the menu won't be the only thing we "talk turkey" about. Remember, though, that one of the goals of getting together to celebrate during this holiday season is to *enjoy* our time together. We can do this better if we use our ears twice as much as we use our mouth, as my dad would say.

Communicating is much more than talking. It includes active listening, clarifying ideas, asking questions, and responding appropriately. Communication is what we say, how we say it, why we say it, and what we left unsaid. It includes how we use facial expressions, how we hold our posture, the tone of our voice, gestures, our mannerisms, behavior, and actions. In fact, it can be rather complicated and easily disrupt relationships and, particularly at this time of year, create challenges at family gatherings.

One of the characteristics of a strong family is in its ability to communicate. Healthy families recognize and respond to both feelings and words. These families also use both verbal and nonverbal communication. This includes such actions as smiling, winking, touching, doing kind things for each other, and taking time (or likely, *making* time) to spend together. I think all of us can remember a time in our childhood when our mom gave us "the look" across the dinner table or our dad raised his eyebrow when we said something that he wasn't quite sure was true. In my own immediate family, my kids and I "talk" at the dinner table with nonverbal actions such as wiggling ears, winking, or giving a thumbs-up when we like what another person has said.

To the other extreme, the most destructive nonverbal communication is silence. Silence sends its own kind of messages: disrespect, disinterest, anger, boredom, or even extreme emotional pain.

Effective communication patterns require time to evolve. For many families, the holiday season and school breaks will lend themselves to spending more time together to reconnect and re-establish (or further establish) these patterns. Strong families have developed effective communication that uses consistent verbal and nonverbal patterns through listening and speaking. All families function better together if their process of communicating is effective and consistent, but not all families know how.

Research indicates there are 8 Good Family Communication Practices that strengthen families**.

- 1) Parents and other adult family members model good communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal.
- 2) The family controls the use of television and does not permit it to interfere with family communication time.
- 3) The family both listens and responds to each other.
- 4) The family recognizes and understands nonverbal messages.
- 5) Independent thinking and individual feelings are encouraged by family members.
- 6) The family recognizes the words or phrases that "push people's buttons" such as turn-off words and put-down phrases.
- 7) Reconciliation patterns are effectively used.
- 8) The family minimizes interruptions in their communication exchanges.

These practices take time to develop and are important throughout the year, but especially important in times when there are physical, financial, and/or emotional stresses on the family. The holiday season is, unfortunately, often accompanied by these additional stresses. For example, perhaps a loved one passed away during the year or the family is short on cash for gifts or seasonal foods.

To help develop better communication skills, families can focus on six key skills that will strengthen and improve communication.**

Listening – There is a difference between simply hearing someone talk and listening to what they are saying. Showing concern for the entire message a family member is trying to express is an important skill to develop.

Rephrasing – This skill leads to a better understanding of the basic message. The listener restates their understanding of what has been said to make sure the message was clearly received.

Probing – This is a skill used by asking questions or making a statement that directs the speaker's attention toward their own feelings, thoughts, or to look at their own situation more deeply.

Positive Speaking – By demonstrating, through words, the positive aspects of the relationship you have with the speaker, the listener affirms their concern and care.

Reflection of Feelings – It is important to acknowledge the other person's feelings. Although the listener may not always agree with those feelings, recognition of how they are feeling will keep the lines of communication open.

Self-Disclosure – I refer to this as “being real.” When the listener shares a part of themselves, it shows the speaker that there is meaning in their relationship. It gives both the listener and the speaker a place to connect.

You'll notice that all of these patterns and skills for effective communication rely on the wisdom my dad shared with me. This holiday season, listen more, speak less, and enjoy the meaning of being family! Until next time, keep living resourcefully!

** Source: “Communication”; Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service.