

Daily Union Article
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Title: Promoting Family Meals

If each person reading this article were to draw a stick figure picture of their family, what would the pictures look like? No doubt, there are an infinite number of variables to how they would look. There are single parent families, two-parent families, families living with multiple generations and other extended relationships, step-families, families with adopted children, children living with “adopted” parents, families that include their pets in the picture, or a single person who has a close group of friends they call family, to mention just a few.

In all of these families, communication plays a key role in the strength, resiliency, and commitment to the family unit. Communication also provides an avenue to express love, care, and concern for one another. Without communication, relationships become strained if not severed.

The comprehensive Essential Life Skills program available through K-State Research and Extension offers a 6-session series on family communication. The following excerpt is derived from that series as a snapshot of what families can do to improve their communication skills. Written by Charlotte Shoup Olsen, professor and extension specialist, family systems, Kansas State University and K-State Research, the program is designed for families who are seeking to improve everyday communication among family members.

We rarely think about our communication with loved ones. But, family communication is very important and determines our relationships with each other, setting the tone for family life. Family communication is not simple. It has many parts. Communication is more than what we say and do. Our messages depend on how we think the other person will react, so we communicate differently with individual members of the family.

Each of us has several different communication patterns that develop over time. It depends on who is communicating.

HOW WE COMMUNICATE

We have something we want to share when we communicate with another family member. Using words is the most common way to express our thoughts and feelings. We also send nonverbal messages with our eyes, facial expressions, and body movements. Have you ever known anyone in your family to stomp out of the room without saying a word? That is a nonverbal message. Objects can be used to send a message. Giving a birthday gift relays a message of appreciation and love. Electronic messages are also common methods for communicating with each other; however, these lessons focus on face-to-face communication.

LISTENING

Another important part of communication is listening. A good listener sends a nonverbal message of care and concern even if he or she does not agree with the message being sent.

Thoughtful listening builds relationships. Conflicts happen when family members do not agree with each other. That is normal because no two people are likely to get along all the time. It takes time and effective communication skills to work through these differences. Treating each other with respect even when we are mad at each other is very important. That means no name calling or insulting. How we treat each other in conflict shows how much we value our relationship. There are many communication skills that can be learned to help families get along with each other. *Source: Basic Family Communication, Publication Number S-S134E; Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service*

How would you rate your own family's communication skills? Are there some topics that always bring a smile to the faces of your family members? Are there topics you avoid because they could cause conflict? Effective communications skills affect all facets of a person's life, not just the family. However, those skills are first learned in the home.

One way to polish communication skills is to spend quality time together. You can do this by playing games together, spending time together outside, taking family trips (day trips or longer), or preparing and enjoying family meals.

September is National Family Meals month. The purpose of National Family Meals Month is to raise awareness of the benefits of frequent family meals. A family meal offers more benefits than simply satisfying hunger. Research shows that the general health and wellness of family members improve when they gather around the table and engage in conversation. Taking part in this effort will reap other rewards, as well. When families are intentional about spending time together preparing and enjoying meals, research shows that children get higher grades, develop a more positive self-esteem, develop healthier eating habits, and are less likely to engage in risky behavior.

Family meal time is a great opportunity to connect with each other. You can initiate conversation by asking open ended questions such as:

- How did your day go at school?
- What happened at work today?
- What would you like to do as a family this weekend?

According to a 2013 Harris poll, only 30% of American families share dinner every night. Families are stretched with work, school, sports, and many other social activities. Eating at home together as a family is an ongoing challenge, but any effort you make in this area reaps big dividends. Sharing even one or two family meals per week as an adolescent is associated with lower rates of obesity in adulthood. *Source: Neumark-Sztainer, D. Family Meals and Adolescents: What Have We Learned From Project Eat (Eating Amount Teens)? Public Health Nutrition, 13 (7), 2010.*

Make it a priority to enjoy at least one additional family meal together each week. Use the family communications tips in this article to help you develop stronger connections with each other by enjoying another meal together. For more information about family communication and Family Meals Month, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!