

# COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN...



A practical guide for parents and caregivers on communicating with children under five.

## IN THIS RESOURCE:

- What are the barriers to effective communication with children?
- The benefits of play for better communication
- Active listening
- How to build communication skills in children

## POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Communicating with kids can be hard, especially with under two's, whose language skills are still in the early stages of development. Some common issues that you may experience when communicating with your child include:

- Verbal speech skills of the child
- Comprehension. Sometimes, as children's language skills are developing, they can be difficult to understand which can result in frustration on both the part of the parent and the child
- Impatience. Parents are often tempted to finish their child's sentences or use guesswork instead of allowing the child time to speak
- Anger. This is common, particularly when parents or children feel they have not been listened to. Feelings of anger can cause us to over generalise, act defensively, say things we don't mean and deliver our messages in harsh ways
- Guilt. When we let negative feelings influence the way in which we speak to our children, it can cause feelings of guilt which can further reduce our chances at effective communication
- Relationship breakdown. Issues in the relationship between parent/caregiver and child can cause one or both to withdraw and avoid sharing feelings/thoughts with the other person. This can also cause negative feelings to influence the way that parents or caregivers and child act and respond when they do talk to each other.

Breaking down the barriers to communication involves self-reflection and self-control. Parents must be able to recognise their own barriers in effective communication and use self-control to manage those impulses as well as any negative thoughts.



## SLOW DOWN

Take the time to really engage with your child. Don't try to rush through conversations or make rushed assumptions. Get down to your child's level and be prepared to spend some time to really understand what your child is trying to say.

Likewise, when you want to talk to your child, slow yourself down. Don't rush at them with emotionally charged commands, questions or assumptions. Take the time to articulate yourself in a way that is clear and simple for your child to understand and comes from a place of positivity and respect.

## THE BENEFITS OF PLAY

Playing with our children is one of the most important and effective tools parents and caregivers have in terms of teaching and nurturing our children. Play provides opportunities to engage our children and teach without the pressure of a typical academic approach. When children are having fun and engaging with an attachment figure, there is increased opportunity for positive attention, conversation and academic coaching, all of which can help strengthen the relationship between parent or caregiver and child and aid in the development of effective communication skills.

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## ACTIVE LISTENING

There is more to effective communication than just the ability to talk. Active listening means allowing another person time to speak without interrupting and using appropriate body language to show the speaker that you are engaged in what they are saying.

Active listeners maintain eye contact, ask appropriate questions and pay close attention not only to what the speaker is saying, but also the feelings that are conveyed in their story.

When listening to your tamariki, it is important to ensure you are validating what they are telling you, rather than discounting it. Avoid minimising their feelings by letting them know that you've heard what they've said and provide accurate feedback.



## BUILDING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN CHILDREN

Between the ages of 12 months to 3-5 years, a child's comprehension of language grows exponentially. While a 12-month-old may only understand about ten words, a 3 year old will be able to understand complex sentences and more than 800 words. While children will differ greatly on how fast their language and communications skills develop, there are ways in which parents and caregivers can promote their child's language development.

**Listening:** Give your child the opportunity to communicate. Be patient and give them the time to speak. Toddlers will often stutter and stammer when they are developing their language skills so it is important to resist the urge to interrupt or guess what they are trying to say, before they've had a chance to finish speaking.

**Talking:** Talking to your child often and engaging them in conversation will boost their interest in speaking. Ensure you get down to their level and engage them in conversation, rather than speaking at them from above.

**Repetition:** When children are learning new words, they will often stutter or mispronounce them. By simply repeating the word correctly and using it in a sentence, you can increase your children's speaking and comprehension skills. This is also an excellent method of increasing your child's vocabulary.

**Modelling:** As with any other skill children's language develops from within their environment. Speaking with your child regularly, describing what you are doing, no matter how mundane you think it is and talking about your feelings, will engage your child and stimulate language development. It is important to remember to resist the urge to use 'baby talk' on your child. Talk to them as you would any other person; this is more beneficial to language development and speaking in 'baby terms' can confuse children and actually hinder the development of language skills.

## BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

A lack of communication skills is a common issue faced by many families. Working to increase the communications skills of your whānau can help to resolve issues faster and more effectively, prevent certain issues before they even eventuate and foster a calmer and more pleasant family environment.

"He aha te kai a te rangatira? He kōrero, he kōrero, he kōrero"  
What is the food of the leader? It is knowledge, it is communication.



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