

Through the eyes of a child

Grandparents raising grandchildren



The importance of open communication

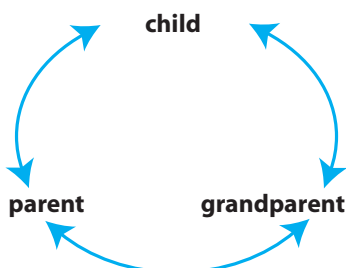
Open communication means taking the time to listen, explaining facts in simple and honest ways, and clearly expressing your thoughts and feelings. Families that communicate openly listen and talk with one another. The lines of communication need to go both directions.



Open communication can help make life changes easier for a child. It can help children understand that behaviors go along with thoughts and feelings. For example, if you're upset with something your grandchild has done, explaining why will help him recognize what made Grandma or Grandpa angry and it will help him to change his behavior.^{1,2}

In many situations, open communication between grandparents, parents, and children is not possible. Sometimes no one may know where the parent is living. Or, for legal reasons, the parent may not be allowed to see the child. Relationships may have a lot of problems. When there are two parents and two sets of grandparents, open communication may be more difficult.

**Open communication—
goes both directions**



Helping your grandchild communicate

Open communication between you and your grandchild is essential. If possible, talk honestly and openly with your grandchildren in a way that they will understand. Having someone they trust to talk with—and get answers from—helps children feel safe and understood. Open communication is important for a positive relationship.

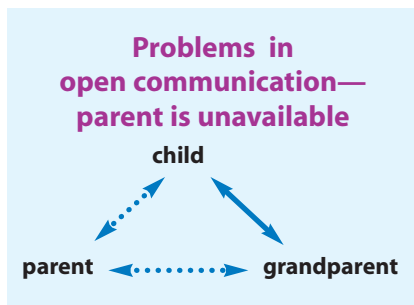
Although it may be out of your control, having your grandchild stay in touch with his or her parent can be helpful. Staying in touch on a regular basis with their parents can be reassuring and comforting to your grandchildren. Not knowing when or if they will hear from their parents is very hard for children.

After talking with a parent, either in person or on the phone, children may seem upset. They may feel confused. In most cases, being upset doesn't mean children shouldn't talk to their parents. Instead, make sure you take time to help them "debrief" and to express their feelings. (For more on this topic, please see fact sheet #7: *Children's Contact with Their Parents*.)

Problems in communication

Some situations prevent open communication. Sometimes the grandparent is in control of communication between the parent and the grandchild. When a parent is in prison or jail, the only way a young child can contact him or her is through another adult—usually the grandparent. The grandparent is responsible for travel to the prison, calling the parent, mailing cards or letters, etc. This role can add more stress for a grandparent who already has a difficult job.

Sometimes it's hard to know what a parent will do, which can be hard on you as well as your grandchild. When a parent drops in without warning, other family members can be caught off guard. They may become angry, making your grandchild feel insecure. Helping your grandchild understand by talking openly about his or her feelings can make the situation easier.



How much should you tell young children?

What children are told about the situation may not reflect what they learn on their own. Children can read people's emotions by what they hear, see, and feel. They hear adults talking or piece together bits of information. Often they understand more than adults think they do.³

When deciding what to tell your grandchildren about the situation, it's important to consider their age and developmental skills. The following tips may help:

1. Avoid telling the child too much.

Many children are simply too young to understand the whole story. When grandparents tell a young child all of the details of the situation, they may be doing more harm than good. Too much information can be confusing, scary, and overwhelming for the child.

2. Avoid telling the child too little or nothing at all.

Kids are smart. They will pick up tidbits about their situation, even if the details are not discussed directly. If children learn about what's going on from someone else, they could feel hurt, deceived, and confused. They may avoid asking you questions or talking to you about other important concerns because they think certain topics are "off limits."

3. Never twist the facts or lie to the child.

Even very young children know the difference between the truth and a lie. They often piece together information, but then are afraid to talk about the truth. Some people may twist the facts in an effort to protect the child. But that approach often backfires. When children are told untruths about the situation, they may become very confused, angry, and hurt. The best strategy is to be honest with your grandchildren, at their level of understanding. Your grandchildren will learn the importance of trust and honesty in relationships.

When talking with any child, it is important to keep in mind his or her skills and limits. Refer to the timeline on the next page for a general idea of children's communication development.

Behaviors as communication: What is your grandchild trying to tell you?

Young children often do not have the language skills to clearly put words to their thoughts and feelings. You'll have to take clues from their behavior to try to understand what they're trying to communicate.

Sometimes, children act out to get attention because they feel sad or neglected. Other times, children withdraw from the environment and ignore special people in their lives. This does not mean they don't care about those people. Sometimes children act in certain ways because they don't know any other way to express themselves.

Timeline for development of communication and language skills⁴

Age	Communication and language development
Birth	Babies can recognize familiar voices and even mock facial expressions, including smiles They communicate by crying to express hunger, pain, discomfort, and fatigue
6 months	Babies begin to remember sounds and their meanings, especially their own name Begin babbling parts of words
6 months to 1 year	Children recognize basic sounds of language and imitate sounds Children may point or gesture to communicate wants and needs
1 to 1½ years	Children speak first words (usually objects and people) Children begin to understand many words, even more than they can say (e.g., the child can understand that “ball is a round toy” without being able to say it) Points to pictures in books
1½ to 2 years	The child’s vocabulary grows dramatically; includes more action words Two-word sentences are common Child begins to gesture less and name more (e.g., instead of pointing to the ball, the child may say, “Want ball”)
2 to 3 years	The child’s vocabulary continues to grow Sentences include combinations of objects and action words Children understand that many different words can be used to describe the same thing Children enjoy and remember hearing or reading stories
4 to 5 years	Children’s sentences are made up of four or five words Comprehension is increasing, but children often misunderstand the complicated language of adults
5 to 7 years	Children’s sentences are more complicated and involve more words; they are able to put several thoughts into sentences that make sense Children begin to respond to what other people say in conversations Children often engage in private conversations with themselves Can tell stories
7 to 8 years	Children learn that one word can have several meanings Understanding of language rules are more developed Children are learning that writing is another way they can communicate their thoughts

Understanding your grandchild’s behaviors may not be easy. It’s not as simple as “If my grandchild does X, he’s feeling Y.” Children (and adults) are not that straightforward. As illustrated in the chart on the next page, one behavior can express a number of different things. Understanding the child and the situation can help you figure out what the behaviors mean.

For help interpreting how children typically act, think, and feel as they work through major life changes, see fact sheet #4, *Disruptions in Close Relationships*.

The source of a child’s behaviors can depend on a lot of different things. Understanding these factors is important. It is one key to helping you understand what your grandchildren are saying when they behave in ways that are confusing or troublesome.

Factors within the child:

- age
- developmental level (especially language skills)
- child’s temperament (is the child usually busy, calm, fussy, or pleasant?)
- gender
- physical well-being (is the child hungry, tired, or sick?)
- emotional well-being (is the child stressed or depressed?)

Factors within the family:

- quality of family relationships
- communication styles in the family
- time spent together
- what has the child been told about the situation?
- what does the child know about the situation?

Factors within the situation:

- how recent are the changes in the child’s life?
- school environment
- quality of friendships
- neighborhood factors
- grandparents’ job
- other stressors and supports

Helping grandchildren and their parents stay in touch

Families have many different ways of staying in touch with one another when they live apart. Depending on the child’s age and developmental level and on the family’s circumstances, a child can communicate with his or her parents through

- phone calls
- letters
- cards
- pictures or videos
- e-mails
- child visits the parents
- parents visit the child
- supervised visitation
- whole family outings
- taping the parent reading a favorite picture book



What interferes with open communication?

Sometimes communication is difficult. Perhaps one or more family members have strong feelings about the situation and express these feelings in ways that may confuse the child.

Warning signs may include:

- Family members feel very angry towards one another. They have trouble dealing with and expressing these feelings.
- Family members feel very defensive and resentful. They may think that others blame them for another family member’s problems. For example, a parent may feel blamed for the child’s problems or a grandparent may feel blamed for a parent’s problems.
- Family members feel hostile toward people outside the family. This may include teachers or other school personnel, “the system,” or professionals who are trying to help. They may turn down support or help that is offered.

These feelings affect children. Feelings that are communicated in very negative ways, such as sarcasm, shouting, yelling, mean statements, hostile silence, or even hitting are harmful. They affect the child’s communication with others and distance them from people who are trying to help. Negative communication keeps families from understanding that every member plays a role. It also can make families less open to change and lead to problems in the child’s life.

Young child’s	
behavior	Possible meanings of the behavior
Crying, distress	I’m tired or hungry.
	I feel like no one loves me.
	I want to be held.
Intense fear of strangers	It hurts my feelings when people don’t keep promises.
	I have trouble trusting people because so many people I love have betrayed me.
	I want to go home where I feel safe and loved.
Withdrawal	I want everything to go back to the way it used to be.
	I want some time alone.
	I feel alone and depressed. I wish someone would talk to me and say they love me.

Being a model for your grandchild

The conversations you have with your grandchild and others about this situation are important. Be mindful of conversations your grandchild may overhear and how you speak of the parent. It is okay to be honest about your feelings, but remember that the child has feelings, too. Even very young children can understand more than you may think, especially about feelings. Also remember that a young child may be confused by things that seem simple to an adult.

Talking about your feelings can show your grandchildren how to express their feelings. You may need to help your grandchild talk about her feelings. Young children may not know the word that “matches” how they are feeling. You may have to help them describe how they are feeling by helping them name their feelings. For example, when your grandchild is crying you might say, “It looks like something is upsetting you. Are you feeling sad?” This can be especially helpful when a child is frustrated or having a hard time communicating.

Children may also use play as a way to show their feelings. Taking time to play with your grandchild and listening to what is being said during play may give you an insight into their thoughts and feelings. For an older grandchild, conversations may be easiest in places that are less “threatening,” such as the car. This may give your grandchild the space needed to feel comfortable talking with you. As you decide how to approach them about a subject, remember to take your grandchild’s age and development into consideration.

Questions to ask yourself

- When my grandchild asks me questions, how do I answer? If I can’t give them the “whole” story, what do I say?
- Throughout the day, do I take time to listen to what my grandchildren are saying (and not saying)? What do their behaviors tell me?
- Do I talk about my feelings in a way that helps my grandchild? Do I encourage my grandchildren to talk about their feelings? Do they need help learning how to describe their feelings?
- How do I communicate with my grandchild? How do I communicate with my own adult child? Are my feelings affecting communication between my grandchild and his/her parents?
- When I talk to others about the child’s parents, what does my grandchild hear?
- What do others say about my grandchild’s parents? How does this make me and my grandchild feel?
- How do I respond when my grandchild talks about his or her parent(s)? Do I encourage or discourage these conversations?
- Am I able to talk about my feelings with my grandchild in a way that is appropriate? How can I help my grandchild talk about his or her feelings?
- Do I know when to seek help? Are there people I can talk to when I feel very angry?

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- ⁴ Papalia, D.E., S.W. Olds, and R.D. Feldman. *Human Development*, 8th edition. New York: McGraw Hill, 2001.



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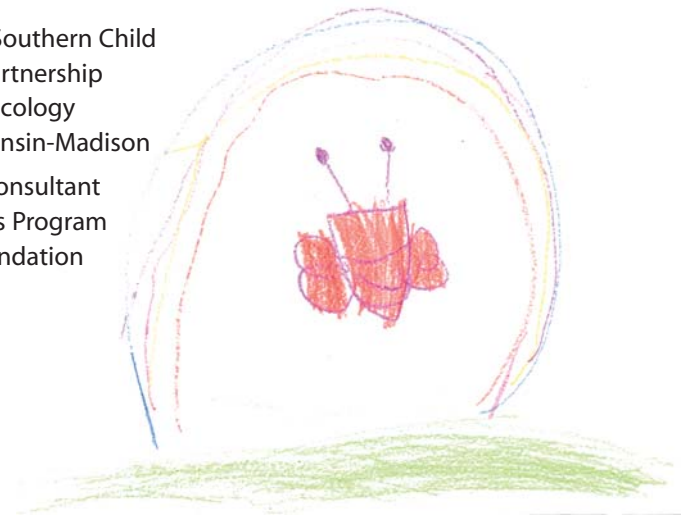
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This fact sheet is part of a series. To obtain the rest of the set, visit the University of Wisconsin-Extension grandparenting web site at www.uwex.edu/relationships/. For more information about this series, contact Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension or Julie Poehlmann, University of Wisconsin-Madison.