

The Limitations of Lectures

"Just remember, one good turn deserves another. Don't expect your mother and I to pander to you if you won't do your chores for us. Why, when I was a kid, children were expected to do a whole list of chores every day and blah, blah . . . and we didn't get an allowance or blah, blah, blah . . . and so when I say . . ."

You probably remember, when you were a child, saying to yourself, "I'll never talk to my children the way my parents talk to me." Then one day, your child did something or said something that rubbed you the wrong way, and before you knew what happened you were ten minutes into a classic rendition of *parental cliché medley number one*.

Lectures aren't always bad. They can offer wisdom, logic, and accurate information. In a classroom full of note takers and diligent students, lectures can be a valuable form of communication. Unfortunately, their value is limited when delivered to a discomforted child.

Because a lecture is one-way communication, there is no guarantee that the message being delivered from the speaker is being received by the audience. If reactions to your lectures are limited to grunts, nods and shrugs, you may be better off talking to a wall. The child is probably thinking that you don't understand and won't listen to her side. She will likely stop participating in the communication process and will simply wait for the lecture to end.

Two-way communication is a more effective way to get information to and from children. It opens the way to understanding. You can make two-way communication work for you and your child in two steps: active listening and talking straight.

Listen first

When you are a good listener, your child has the opportunity to express frustration or confusion and to brainstorm for solutions. You demonstrate respect for the child's competence and provide an opportunity for her to gain confidence when she discovers her own power to change or to solve problems.

Try these listening techniques:

- **Be silent.** You can't talk and listen at the same time, so be still and let your child tell you what is going on. Give him time to formulate thoughts.
- **Be open minded.** Don't make a final decision until you have all the facts.
- **Stay focused on the child.** Don't let your thoughts jump ahead to planning what you will say next.
- **Hear the words and watch body language.** Pay close attention to what is being said and watch for the feelings behind it. The child might say, "I don't care," but you will know it isn't true if you notice a frown, a deep blush, or tears barely glistening in the eyes. Consider there are deeper feelings to explore.
- **Open the door for self-discovery.** Ask nonjudgmental questions that will help the child express thoughts without fear of personal criticism. Instead of saying "how could you be so selfish?" you might calmly ask, "why did you make that decision?" or, "how would you feel if the situation were reversed?" Give the child a chance to see and experience the natural consequences of a particular behavior for himself, rather than lecturing him about right or wrong.

- **Repeat the child's message.** Make sure you understand what the child is saying by paraphrasing: "So what you are saying is . . ." You may find that you misunderstood an important point.

Children who feel heard develop more trust in the listeners and more confidence in themselves.

Straight Talk

Young children and teenagers seem to have their own language. They understand some points differently than adults. To children, truth is an explanation of the way they want it to be; the words *I might* or *maybe* are the same as *I promise*; and a rule is subject to broad interpretation. Straight talk helps avoid misunderstandings.

Try these four tips:

- **Be specific.** Spell out details when you know them, but don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."
- **Avoid maybes.** If you can't promise, don't let hopeful anticipation set your child up for a fall. You can say, "Sorry, I can't promise that."
- **Get feedback.** After stating what you want the child to hear, stop and find out if your meaning got through clearly.
- **Follow-through.** Make sure your actions back up your words.

Problems? Call the Student Assistance Program and arrange to talk to a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members.

Call (515) 244-6090 or (800) 327-4692.
TTY: (515) 288-9022 or (877) 542-6488.