

## Family Nutrition: A RECIPE for Good Communication<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

One of the most important things that parents can do is to talk to their children about healthy eating and physical activity. With the growing media attention on childhood overweight and obesity, parents are becoming more concerned about their children's health. This is especially true for preteens (9–12 year olds) and teens (13–18 year olds). At this age, children are beginning to assume more control over their eating habits, deciding what to eat at school, with friends, and at home. At the same time, preteens and teens are becoming more self-conscious about their appearance. Youth development specialists refer to this as the *imaginary audience*—that "imaginary" group of peers that judge you based on how you look and how you act. As preteens and teenagers become more self-conscious, they may also begin to change their eating habits as a means to control their weight and appearance.

Helping a preteen or teen form healthy attitudes about eating and physical activity requires good communication. By communicating with others, preteens and teens receive the feedback necessary to challenge the unrealistic and critical messages from the "imaginary audience"—for example, messages

that reinforce the American ideal of a thin or muscular body, or messages that encourage dieting, weight loss, or steroid use.

Family communication can also influence the way the family selects, purchases, prepares, and eats meals. Poor family communication leads to disagreements or misunderstandings about food preferences and the foods that the family buys. Healthy family communication leads to better decision-making about the foods family members choose to eat, as well as the activities that they choose to engage in. Effective communication is characterized by:

- (R)eflective listening,
- (E)ncouragement,
- (C)ompromise and Cooperation,
- ("I") Messages,
- (P)ractice, and
- (E)ngagement (Kaplan, et al., 2007).

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R-E-C-I-P-E refers to some of the basic components of healthy communication that are related to effective family food decision-making.

## The Basics

Before we put the ingredients of the R-E-C-I-P-E together, let us start with the basics. First, effective communication is characterized by both the sender (the person talking) and the receiver (the person listening) working together. The sender of the message and the receiver of the message both have the responsibility to ensure that the message is being understood properly. The sender's responsibility is to phrase the message in a way that the receiver can understand. For example, the parent of young child may say, "Oranges are good for you." On the other hand, the parent of a teenager may say, "Oranges are a good source of vitamin C." Both are conveying a similar message, that oranges are healthy, but are at different levels of complexity; one is focusing on general health ("it's good for you"), while the other is focusing on why it is healthy ("it has vitamin C").

## (R)eflective Listening

The responsibility of the receiver is to listen. Listening is an important skill that is referred to in a previous publication (FCS2151) as "Active Listening." It is also the first ingredient in our R-E-C-I-P-E for effective communication. Reflective Listening (also called Active Listening) involves (a) asking questions, (b) paraphrasing or restating the message to make sure that you understand the message correctly, and (c) empathizing, or putting yourself in the other person's shoes (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2001).

For example, a child might say, "I don't want to eat that."

The parent could respond:

- With a question such as "Do you want to know what else we're having for dinner?", or
- With a re-statement by saying, "You don't like what I'm making," or
- With empathy by saying, "Sometimes it's hard to try new things."

On the other hand, a parent might say, "I am making a big meal for dinner, please be home on time so that we can all eat together as a family."

A child's response would be to:

- Ask questions, "What time is dinner?", or
- Restate what they've heard, "I'll be home on time so we can eat as a family," or
- Offer an empathic response such as "I know this is important to you, I'll be home for dinner."

Each of these Reflective Listening statements is effective because they avoid defensive (or smart aleck) responses. A defensive response, like a child saying, "I'll be home whenever I want," only leads to disagreements and conflict. Communication breaks down and the conversation is over. Reflective listening encourages the parent and the child to work together to maintain harmony in the relationship. In this situation, the parent can act as a role model, calmly restate the request, and encourage a more reflective response from their preteen or teenage child (see next section).

## (E)ncouragement

The second ingredient, (E)ncouragement, is similar to empathy. Sometimes people want more than just a reflection of what they have said; they want to know that you appreciate what they had to say (Adler, et al., 2001). These encouraging, or supporting, responses let the person know that you appreciate them. Encouraging responses can take the form of *praise*:

*"I'm really glad you told me that you like what I'm planning to make for dinner tonight. Sometimes it's hard for me to know what you like and don't like."*

It can also take the form of *reassurance*:

*"Don't be afraid to ask me to buy your favorite food; it's good to have a treat every now and then."*

Like (R)eflective Listening, (E)ncouragement helps keep the lines of communication open by supporting other family members in their attempts to communicate effectively.

## (C)ompromise and Cooperation

The third ingredient, (C)ompromise and Cooperation, is one of the most critical ingredients in the RECIPE for family communication. Without compromise and cooperation, healthy relationships between family members would be difficult. Either the parent (or children) would exert sole control over decision-making, or each family member would compete against each other for just about everything (food, attention, TV). In both cases, no one is happy. Although parents often feel that they compromise (or give in) too much to their children, it is their role as parents to teach children how to compromise and cooperate with one another. It is not an easy task, but the skills of compromise and cooperation can be taught at home during conversations about food, meal planning, or family activities.

For example, a parent might say,

*"Here are some foods we have in the cupboard. If you give me a hand cooking, I'll let you choose what we have for dinner."*

On the other hand, a child might say,

*"I like what you're making for dinner, but I don't like onions. Will you make part of the casserole for me without onions?"*

Through compromise and cooperation, family members are able to find solutions to most conflicts or disagreement, whether it is about family meals or sibling rivalry. Although it is difficult for parents to avoid imposing their own solutions, encouraging and modeling compromise and cooperation will lead to a conversation about solutions that everyone can agree with.

## ("I") Messages

The fourth ingredient for healthy family communication is "I" messages. An "I" message is a specific way of telling others about how you feel, especially if they have said or done something that is

upsetting. In a previous publication, *Winning Ways to Talk with Young Children* (FCS2021), the author discusses the difference between an "I" message and a "you" message. An "I" message accepts the individual for who they are and communicates how his or her behavior makes you feel or think. A "you" message tells the other person what they have done wrong and puts the blame for your thoughts and feelings on them.

"I" statements:

- "I feel badly when I cook a big meal that won't be eaten."
- "I really like it when you make my favorite meal."

"You" statements:

- "YOU make me so mad!"
- "I don't like what *you've* made for breakfast, so I'll make something myself."

By stating your feelings in an "I" message, you avoid putting other people down or attacking them when they do something that is upsetting. Rather, "I" statements give the other person the responsibility to change their behavior. By expressing how you think and feel the other person has the opportunity to decide how they respond.

## (P)ractice

The fifth ingredient in the recipe for effective family communication is practice...PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE! Like any new skill, good communication requires a lot of practice in order to get good at it. It might feel a little uncomfortable for parents at first, but if they stick with it, things will get easier. If this is a parent's first time using these skills when planning meals, preparing food, or planning family activities, don't expect everything to go smoothly the first time. Keep the R-E-C-I-P-E for good communication in mind and allow others the opportunity to practice. This will require patience, another P that could be added to the RECIPE. With patience and practice, good communication can be learned.

## (E)ngagement

The final ingredient is (E)ngagement. Engagement refers to each family member's level of involvement in the communication process. If two family members are truly "engaged" in a conversation, they will be focusing on one another, and what each has to say. On the other hand, if two people are talking, but are not engaged, they will be less likely to use the RECIPE for effective communication. Engagement means that if someone is speaking to you, give your whole attention.

Engagement is also the process of tuning out distractions and tuning in to the person who is speaking. How many times when talking to family members do we get distracted by other things that are going on around us? For example, radio, television or computer. Communication experts call this "noise" (Adler, et al., 2001). Noise refers to those things that interfere with effective communication. Noise can be from the environment (like a TV, radio, or other people), or it can be mental (like thinking about other things). Noise is a barrier to effective communication. If we can do things to reduce the amount of noise in our environment or in our minds, we are more likely to engage in the communication process.

## Conclusion

A RECIPE for good communication about healthy eating and physical activity involves:

- (R)eflective listening
- (E)ncouragement
- (C)ompromise and cooperation
- ("I") messages
- (P)ractice, and
- (E)ngagement

When these ingredients are blended together, and with patience allowed to rise slowly over time, the family will have the bread of a healthy family life: effective communication. Healthy nutrition and physical activity will increase, conflict and

disagreements about food and nutrition will decrease, and the health of all family members will be improved. Try it for yourself. Blend the ingredients, add a little sugar (love and support), and the bread of healthy family life will surely improve the relationships between all family members.

## References

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Kaplan, M., Crago, N. Herzog, F., James, L., Kiernan, N., Middlemiss, W., Nolte, T., & Weinreb-Welch, L. (2007). *FRIDGE (Food-Related Intergenerational Discussion Group Experiences)*. University Park, PA: Penn State Cooperative Extension.

## Additional Resources

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Perkins, D.F., & Fogarty, K. (2005). *Active listening: A communication tool*. Gainesville, FL: Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication number: FCS2151.

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**Table 1.** RECIPE for Good Communication

Basic Communication Skill	What is it about?	Examples
<p><b>R</b></p> <p>Reflective Listening</p>	<p>Reflective or active listening. In order to truly hear what another person is saying, repeat back what you think they said either exactly or in your own words. By repeating or rephrasing what the speaker said, the speaker knows they have been heard.</p>	<p><i>Example 1</i> Parent/caregiver: "I am making a big meal for dinner, please be home on time. It's important to me that we all eat together as a family." Child: "So, what you are saying is that it is important for me to be home on time because you are making a big meal and really want the family to be together and eat together as a family."  <i>Example 2</i> Child: "I don't want to eat that! What else is there to eat?" Parent/caregiver: "So, you don't like what I am making and you want to know what else you can eat for dinner."</p>
<p><b>E</b></p> <p>Encouragement</p>	<p>Encourage and empathize with each other. Express appreciation for other family members' attempts to communicate properly. Consider what they are trying to express to you by putting yourself in their "shoes."</p>	<p>Parent/caregiver: "I am really happy you told me that you like what I am planning to make for dinner tonight. Sometimes it's hard for me to know that there are some foods you really like."</p>
<p><b>C</b></p> <p>Compromise &amp; Cooperation</p>	<p>Compromise and cooperation with each other. Find ways to work together rather than fight.</p>	<p>Parent: "Here are some foods we have in the cupboard. If you give me a hand cooking, I'll let you choose what we have for dinner."</p>
<p><b>I</b></p> <p>"I" Message</p>	<p>"I" messages. Rather than focusing on the behavior of the other person, express your own feelings.</p>	<p>Parent: "I feel badly when I cook a big meal that won't be eaten."  Grandparent: "It makes me happy when what I cook is appreciated."  Child: "I really like it when you make my favorite meal."</p>
<p><b>P</b></p> <p>Practice</p>	<p>Practice; practice; practice. Good communication is difficult to learn. It takes practice! It will feel uncomfortable at first until you get the hang of it. Expect to take time to get it right and allow other family members to get it right as well.</p>	
<p><b>E</b></p> <p>Engagement</p>	<p>Engagement. If someone is speaking to you, give them your whole attention. It is difficult to really hear what someone is saying if you are not paying attention.</p>	<p>Examples of poor "engagement":  A son is telling his mother why he doesn't like peas, but his mother is thinking about a television news story she heard about how peas are good for you (instead of listening to the child).  Assuming what a parent is going to say, a daughter doesn't bother paying attention to what a parent is actually saying.</p>

Source: Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences Cooperative Extension