



Family Communication

A practical resource for parents and carers of school aged children

by Kate Nicolle and Emily Nickson Williams



About Us

This book has been written by us, Kate and Emily, we're Amity and we are relationship experts. We care A LOT about people having strong, thriving relationships.

Infact, we believe that good quality relationships are a right not a privilege. We think that relationships are the most important thing in the world because they can make us feel happier, safer and more loved. They can also make us feel lonely, sad and sometimes anxious. That's why we think that relationship care is something we should all pay attention to.

What is relationship care?

It's simple really. Relationship care is about looking after the relationships you have with the people in your life who are important to you, in the same way that you might focus on the care of your physical and mental health.

If you want to know more about what we do:

www.weareamity.co.uk

We hope you find our little book useful,

Kate & Emily

Welcome to the 'Why good family communication matters for your child' workbook.

In this booklet you will find the following helpful topics!

Why communication quality matters to your child's education?

- 1 Why does your relationship quality have an impact on how your child builds and manages their own friendships/relationships?
- 2 What might be happening with the communication at home that could impact on how your child copes with the school day?
- 3 Why is it important to be accountable for the quality of your parental relationship whether together or separated, what difference does it make to your child?

How to create the best relationship environment for your children:

- 1 How to communicate in an assertive way to feel heard and be heard, including for your child.
- 2 How to communicate with school staff so you feel able to make your point but do so in a constructive way so a resolution can be found without damaging the parent/school relationship.
- 3 Simple skills and strategies to improve your relationship as a couple/parents/co-parents.
- 4 Be your child's first and most important teacher, learn how to model for them healthy ways to express your needs, resolve disagreements and show kindness.

INTRODUCTION

Why communication quality matters to your child's education?

Communicating well with others is one of the most important life skills children need. When children communicate positively, they are able to express their feelings in a non-confrontational way which boosts their self-esteem and overall confidence. Children who communicate confidently are better able to relate to other people, develop greater social skills and problem solve. There are so many benefits for your child and it's never too late to start helping your child to become the best communicator they can!

This simple to use workbook will help you and anyone else raising children nurture and improve their communication skills. This will help them at home, at school and in the community.

Children with these skills are more likely to do well at school because they will be listening and learning, making and maintaining friendships and will ask for help when they need it.

It is important to support and encourage children to develop their communication skills from an early age.

This is what we think good communication looks like:

- Your child asking for what they need without shouting or demanding or disrupting the class.
- Telling you when they feel unsafe in the school or home environment.
- Talking to you about problems and knowing that you will listen.
- Having friendships that are safe, fun and feel equal.
- Understanding the importance of sharing, being kind and showing respect to others at school and at home.

Firstly, have a think about your children as individuals, how old they are and how they currently communicating with those around them?

Questions to think about...

- ? How does my child currently communicate with me and other people?
- ? Is there anything that worries me about their communication?
- ? Have I spoken to anyone about concerns I might have?

Let's remind ourselves that no family is perfect, and this workbook is about building on the strengths you already and making progress rather than trying to be perfect.

What we do know for certain is that when parents and carers of school aged children don't communicate well it has an impact on how well those children do at school. When they don't do well at school this then has an obvious knock-on impact on their future life chances.

Parental Relationships - why do we care about them?

children exposed to frequent, destructive conflict are more likely to:

- EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY
- HAVE PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS
- DEVELOP BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS
- DO WORSE AT SCHOOL

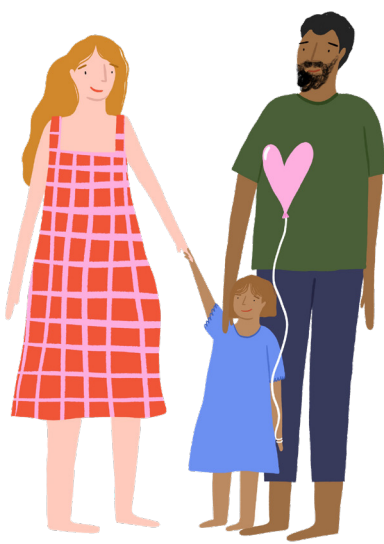


There is a knock on effect in later life:

- ADULT RELATIONSHIPS
- PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING
- EMPLOYMENT

Why does your relationship quality have an impact on how your child builds and manages their own friendships and relationships?

Children learn from the people around them, parents, friends, family, teachers. It's a two-way thing really, they take in the behaviour from the people around them, then they use it themselves on the very same people they copied from.



So, let's think about it, if that behaviour is shouting until you get your own way, or asking calmly for what you need - negative or positive it will stick and become a habit.

If we know this is the case, we need to be proactive about trying to make sure what children see is useful for them to learn rather than bad behaviour.

But don't panic, we are not saying to raise children who are able to have good relationships must only every have wonderful example set to them...pew.

What we are saying is the more a parent can be aware that their children are the audience to the way they speak to each other and adjust the way they express themselves then that will be a big win.

Therefore, the message is not...never argue but it is... argue in a more positive way!

If your child sees you argue better together, this will equip them with the skills they have seen you use to communicate positively with their friends, teachers etc.

Think about the relationships you grew up observing, did you learn valuable things from them? Or do you feel damaged by them?

You get to choose now how your child might answer that same question in the future.

Your children are like little sponges they soak up everything around them, they are constantly learning from everybody they spend time with. They are looking up at the adults around them and watching how they behave so they can copy. Children trust their parents and carers and believe that how they behave must be the right way and that it's OK to copy because their parents and carers are just showing them how things are done.

Here is the first problem with that...

Sometimes, as adults we speak to and treat others in a way that is harmful to children trying to learn good communication and manners.

For example, if you go into a shop and you are talking the whole time on your phone whilst at the checkout, you then pay the assistant without saying thank you to them, this teaches your child that basic 'please' and 'thank you' manners are not that important when out shopping, so they are likely to do the same.

How about the relationships you have at home? Why are these so important?

Your children may one day have adult relationships of their own. As their parent or carer you probably want them to be in happy, loving, safe and equal relationships. Of course, they may may or may not choose to have a partner someday – either way that's is OK but we need to prepare them either way. Remember that they are learning from the relationships they saw as they were growing up. As adults they will look back on those relationships as a guide as to how they should behave and how they should be treated by the other person.



Questions to think about here...

- ? Are the adult relationships my children see happy, loving, safe and equal?
- ? Am I worried about the relationship my children see?
- ? Have I spoken to anyone about my worries?

What might be happening with the communication at home that could impact on how your child copes with the school day?

Think about this next example.

A child goes to school having spent the morning listening to their parents or carers bickering, blaming and criticising each other, maybe also shouting at each other.

The child keeps quiet and tries to stay out of the way, arriving at school feeling what?



Parents are often wrapped up in the situation they are in with their partner that they don't stop to think about how their argument may be impacting on their child. Parents will often say things like "They are not bothered by our arguments, they've never said it bothers them, they're fine"

What might be wrong with that statement?

The same child shouts at, criticises and blames another child that day in school and gets into trouble for it.

Hopefully what we have learned here is that children are very much affected by what's happened at home before they leave for school or the night before. If there has been an argument at home between parents or carers they will think about this throughout the school day which impacts on their ability to learn. Children have very little say about how they live, who they live with and how those people get along. When there has been an argument at home children are more likely to feel emotions that prevent them from concentrating on the day.

This can include:

Sadness

Children feel sad because they don't often know why there has been an argument, they worry about the future of the relationships between their caregivers and will want to know what is going on, are you splitting up, where will I live, is this my fault? School staff may notice that your child is looking sad.

Anger

Children feel angry about arguments at home because they feel powerless to 'fix' home problems. They may feel blamed. They may also mirror that anger and take this out on their classmates and staff at school. This can take the form of a range of unhelpful behaviours such as bullying others, fighting and being disruptive.



Anxiety

This is common feeling when children are not sure why things at home are not good. Anxiety has a serious impact on how well children do at school. When children are anxious they often have physical symptoms too and may complain about headaches, being unable to sleep, lack of appetite and tummy aches.

Questions to think about here...

- ❓ Is my child anxious, angry or sad?
- ❓ Do I know why this is and have I explored whether home relationships could be a reason for this?
- ❓ Have I spoken to my child's school or someone else about this?

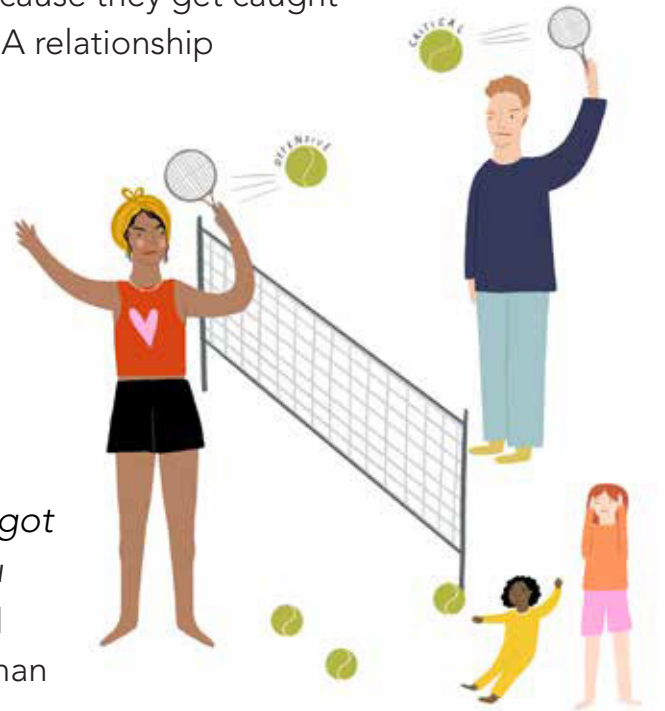
Are you playing Toxic Tennis?

Most people get into a game of toxic tennis because they get caught up arguing over who is right and who is wrong. A relationship is not a competition but so often we end up creating a competitive atmosphere. This is not always intentional, sometimes it just evolves in this way.

Couples and parents who are no longer in a relationship can get drawn into playing 'toxic tennis'!

For example, your partner says to you "You forgot to put the bins out!", and you bark back "You forgot to pay the bills!" in retaliation. You feel like the winner because your mistake is worse than theirs (in your mind!).

You feel **defensive** (despite it being true that you forgot to put the bins out) and don't like it when you are criticised by the other person. So, you will now look out for an opportunity to **criticise** the other person due to you feeling **defensive**. And so, the game of 'toxic tennis' continues. All the while, your children are in the audience watching the unhelpful and unhealthy game unfold!



The solution?

Someone really needs to catch the ball and admit the part they played in the situation. It is very healthy for children to see adults admit when they are wrong and do something about it. It encourages children to do the same when faced with conflict.

Why is it important to be accountable for the quality of your parental relationship whether together or separated, what difference does it make to your child?

Being accountable is another way of saying that we are responsible for how we look after our relationships with others knowing that it has an impact on our child's wellbeing. Therefore, if we continue with poor communication with the people around us aware that it has a negative impact on our child's wellbeing then we are knowingly doing harm to them.

This causes a child to feel stress.

Stress puts pressure on our bonds with others, especially those we share our home with. It's important to acknowledge its impact.

If children are unsure of the quality of the relationship between their parents, whether they are together or separated it can result in a child being worried, anxious and sometimes displaying challenging behaviour in order to test the bond with their parents.



Children need to feel secure in the knowledge that their parents will offer them security, unconditional love and will always be available to listen. This creates what is called a 'secure attachment' and is important for a child to function well, even in times of stress.

Parents who take accountability for the impact of the way they communicate have learnt to acknowledge when they have made a mistake and are able to repair the situation, or at least try!

Top tip:

Do you often blame and criticise other people? This could be the teacher at school or your partner or anyone else in the family. It can be useful to notice if you do this as this is us trying to avoid being accountable for a situation or issue. To ensure your relationships at school and at home stay healthy and positive try to avoid blame and acknowledge and accept any part you played in the situation.

Sorry is also a word we need to get more comfortable with using!

Children in the Middle

Are your children in the middle of your conflict and arguments?

putting children IN THE middle



When there are arguments with or partner or our child's other parent, children can sometimes get caught up. When adults do argue children simply have no choice but to watch from the side-lines as their parents and carers try to score points against one another. Sometimes children try to get involved to protect their parents in order to make the conflict stop.

They try to please each parent by agreeing that the other is wrong even if they don't mean it just to make it stop. There are a number of 'roles' that children can take on when their parents are not together, as explained by family mediator Lisa Parkinson in her book; *Family Mediation*, 2014. In the book Lisa, who spend many years working with children caught between parental arguments, explains the roles that some children find themselves stuck in.

Putting a child in the middle of a relationship where there is poor communication puts them at risk of developing poor relational skills of their own.

- 1** The danger of using a child to pass on messages...they become involved in details about their care and schedule that are not appropriate for them to know, they are just a child, they shouldn't be worrying about adult decisions and details.
- 2** The danger of using a child to mediate between parents...the child feels like they have to try in some way to keep the peace, that can feel like a heavy burden.
- 3** The danger of making a child feel like a judge...is that they are put in the uncomfortable position of feeling like they have to decide which parent is right and which parent is wrong in a situation.
- 4** They're often made to feel like they have to think that there is a 'goodie' and a 'baddie' in every situation.
- 5** The danger of making a child spy... is that they may learn to lie and adopt sneaky behaviour, they may feel pressure to report back details about each parent that they would normally not be interested in as a child.



How to communicate in an assertive way to feel heard and be heard, including for your child in school situations.

Let's be clear, there is often confusion between being assertive and being aggressive.

Being assertive is when you communicate in a clear firm and respectful way. For example, saying you feel unhappy and then explaining why without blaming the other person or raising your voice.

On other hand **being aggressive** is when we are seeking to blame the other person and do so often with a raised voice and a lack of respect for the other person

For example 'we are in the situation and it is your fault - you'd better sort it out'

There are ways to be more assertive...



Try not to start what you want to say with 'You'

When you do this, it immediately makes the other person feel like you are blaming them, so they are likely be defensive in return.

None of this is going to help you have a good conversation at school or anywhere else.

Instead try this...

Name how you are feeling, "I feel unheard right now" for example rather than "You are not listening to me!"

Explain how the situation is affecting you in a calm way, trying to avoid blaming anyone for what is happening for example "I am finding it hard to be calm because I feel as if you are blaming my child and that's making feel defensive".

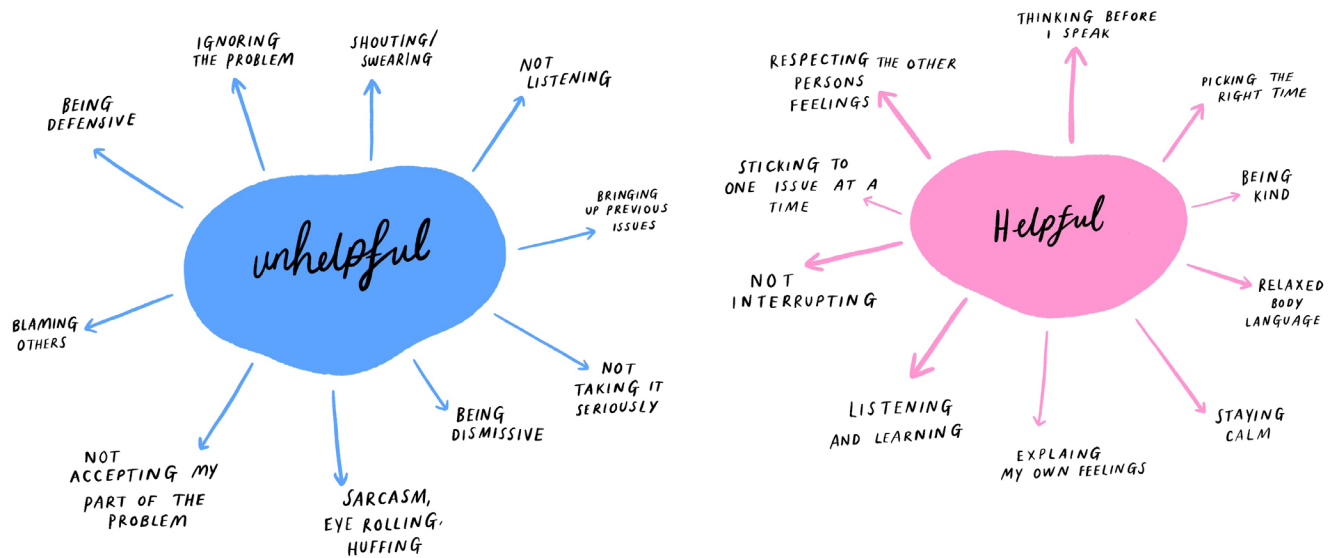
In a clear and respectful way **explain what outcome you are hoping for**, for **example**: "I would like us to find a better way to communicate how we are feeling about what's happening as I find the many emails you send me overwhelming."

Questions to think about here...

- ? How do you approach a situation that has upset you, wound you up, made you angry?
- ? Could you communicate in a more helpful way?
- ? Who would benefit if you could manage to communicate in a better way?



Have a look at the image below and see what difference healthy communication makes to your next argument instead of unhealthy.



There are always two people in a conversation or a situation, they both have thoughts, feelings and show their behaviours, but why are they important?

For example, if you see someone you know in the street and you smile at them and they don't smile back. You notice that they don't smile back (this is their behaviour) you then have thoughts and feelings about why they didn't smile such as they don't like me, have I upset them?

This will then influence your own behaviour for example next time you see them you might ignore them as a punishment. Now you have created a situation purely based on the assumption you made that they were ignoring you on purpose and actually maybe they just didn't see you!

So don't assume that you know what someone's thoughts and feelings are - we often get this totally wrong. We are quick to assume we know why someone has behaved the way they have. Many arguments start because of this.

The solution to this simple problem is to acknowledge it by communicating!

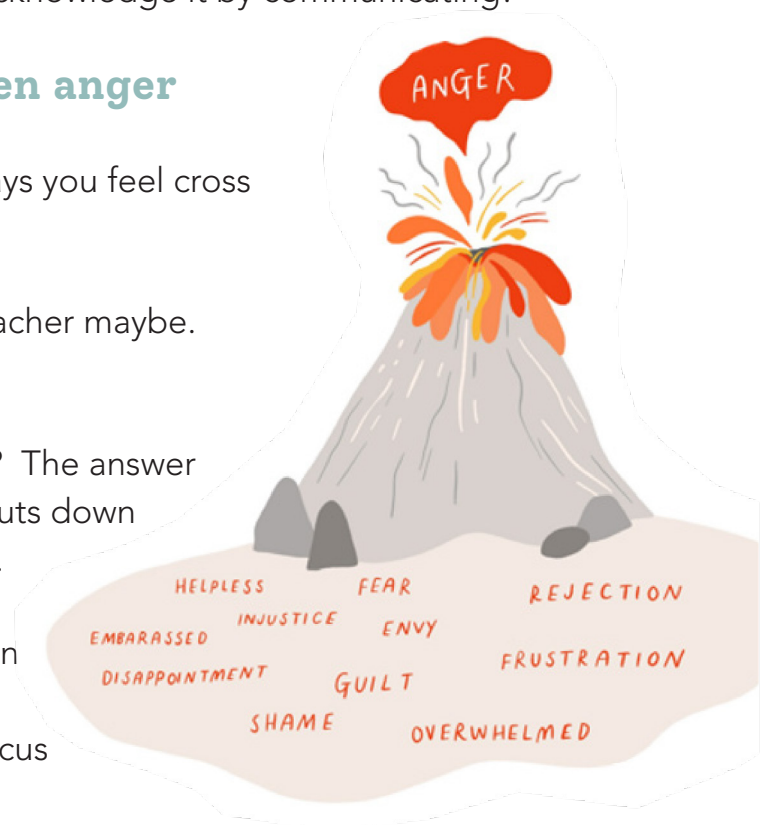
What we see, feel, share is often anger

Your head said you are angry, your heart says you feel cross or disappointed.

We then share that anger with others, a teacher maybe. How do you think it makes them feel?

Does it get the result you were hoping for? The answer is probably not because anger normally shuts down the conversation and someone walks away.

Anger doesn't come from nowhere. A feeling always fuels the anger explosion, but we usually keep the feeling hidden and just focus on the behaviour of showing we are angry.



But this means we are never properly understood by the person we are sharing our anger with because we have kept the real reason hidden.

So what should I do instead?

The best thing to do is explain what really made your anger erupt.

We can do this by calmly saying *"I am feeling sad, disappointed or upset because..."*

It works both ways, if the other person is angry then a good idea is to say *"I can see that you are angry, what is it that is making you so angry?"*

Simple skills and strategies to improve your relationship and communication as a couple, and as parents/co-parents

5 things you can do when you are feeling wound up by your arguments

Here are 5 top tips to try

- 1** Let your partner know that you need some time out and go for a walk
- 2** Take some deep breaths, go somewhere quiet and calm down for 20 minutes
- 3** If you feel as if you are going round in circles, agree to stop the conversation and talk later
- 4** If you feel that your partner isn't listening, press the pause button and give them a few minutes uninterrupted to say how they feel and then you do the same. Both try to really listen even if you don't like what they are saying.
- 5** Offer reassurance by saying something like "I do want to sort this out and I care about you but I think we need to talk when we are less angry with each other".

Spend 5 minutes thinking about the following questions.

- ? What did I say and do?
- ? What was my partner thinking and feeling because of what I said and did?
- ? What did my partner say and do?
- ? What was I thinking and feeling because of that and how did that then make me behave towards them? What did my thoughts and feelings make me do?
- ? What effect did all of this have on how the argument developed? It caused what to happen?
- ? How did you end up behaving towards each other?

It can help to take a step away from the situation and think about what might be causing you to disagree with your partner.

Knowing how your partner likes to feel loved and cared for by you can be the golden ticket to a stronger bond between you.

Spends 5 minutes thinking about your love languages.

(Gary Chaman (1992))

Reflect on which love language is yours and think of an example you can give to your partner so they can feel confident that they understand,



Sometimes we all need a helping hand to understand each other a bit better.

We often expect others to know what we need or to magically know how we are feeling. Don't rely on magic, help each other by being clear. Make your very own cheat sheet, everyone can do this, adults and children, give it a go.

I feel safe when.....

example: you don't laugh at me when I get things wrong

If feel frustrated when....

example: you talk over me when I'm trying to explain something

I feel better about things when....

example: you reassure me that my thoughts are not silly

I feel like you are listening to me when you....

example: don't look at your phone when we are talking

Things that you can do to help me to stop worrying so much...

example: reassure me that it's ok if I make mistakes



And Finally...

Helpful things you can do for your relationship

- 1 Be kind.** Simple, look for opportunities to say a kind thing or do a kind thing.
- 2 Show you want to communicate** in a positive way by actually listening to learn not just listening so you can respond.
- 3** Think about your partners **love language** and activate your actions.
- 4 Repair as this helps you to prepare.** Repairing (acknowledging/ apologising) the damage done by arguments means you will be better prepared to communicate more positively the next time you clash.
- 5 Try to understand your partners point of view.** What matters to them may not matter to you and visa versa. However, if you don't make the effort to appreciate each other's perspective on something you can be sure that you will stay stuck. Both of you making your points over and over again with no resolve.

Thank you for taking the time to read this booklet.

Hopefully it has helped you think about the way you communicate, the example you are showing to your child and how you might want to make little tweaks to help them be the best communicator they can!

For more information about Amity's work come and take a look:

www.weareamity.co.uk





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