



# **HEALTHY COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

A Step-by-Step Guide  
For Educators

Excerpted From Curricula Developed By The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)



# HEALTHY COMMUNICATION SKILLS

## PURPOSE OF SESSION

1. Increase awareness about nonverbal and verbal communication and teach basic skills for improving conversation.
2. Allow students time to practice the use of healthy nonverbal and verbal communication skills.

## KEY MESSAGES

1. Healthy communication means:
  - Feeling heard, understood and respected by the other person.
  - Being able to listen, understand, and respect what the other person is saying.
2. Healthy communication skills consist of both nonverbal (messages we send with our bodies and facial expressions) and verbal skills (what we say and how we say it). Our verbal and nonverbal communication should match!
3. Healthy communication skills can help students have more positive conversations with others and handle conflicts or problems with others appropriately.
4. Conflicts happen! We cannot avoid them. If we choose our words and actions carefully, we can resolve conflicts without hurting others.

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## COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE

1. First introduce the two ways we can communicate.

**SAY:** *There are two ways we can communicate: nonverbally and verbally. Nonverbal communication refers to the things we do not say directly. They are the messages we send with our body and facial expressions (e.g., eye contact, gestures, posture, body movements). Verbal communication refers to the things we say and how we say them (e.g., tone of voice).*

2. Introduce the activity, *Silent Line-Up*.

**SAY:** *Before talking more about healthy communication, we are going to first do an activity that will give us a chance to see why communication is important – while also having a little fun. This activity is called “Silent Line-Up.” Everyone needs to be silent during the entire activity – no one can say anything or make any noises. You can only communicate non-verbally, by using eye contact, hand signs, or other physical gestures. Everyone is going to have to really work together to communicate and understand each other to complete this activity.*

3. Direct students’ attention to the prepared newsprint (or blackboard/ whiteboard): Line up by... **< select a rule for the line-up, e.g., shoe size, birthday month >**.
4. Instruct students that they will have approximately 3 minutes to line up by **< rule for the line-up >**, from one side of the classroom to the other.
5. Allow students approximately 4 minutes to complete the activity. It is fine if students have not finished the line-up. In fact, it is likely they will not finish.
6. After approximately 4 minutes, instruct students to return to their seats and facilitate a discussion about the activity.

**ASK:** *What was the hardest part about this activity?*

- Allow several students to respond.

7. Wrap-up the activity.

**SAY:** *We saw in this activity that it can be really hard to do something simple if we cannot talk to or communicate openly with each other. Although this was an exaggerated example, the point is that it is difficult to communicate with other people if you are limited in the skills you use.*

*Imagine you are building a car or building. If you only had one or two tools (just a hammer and level, for example), it would be very difficult to build a solid car or building. It is the same way with communication. If you only have one or two tools – like using hand gestures or making facial expressions – it is very difficult to communicate effectively with others.*

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Today we are going to talk about a wide range of tools, or skills, we can use to have healthy communication with others. We are going to fill your toolbox with a lot of healthy communication skills.

These skills can help us have more positive conversations with others and can also help us when we are faced with a problem or conflict. I said **when** we are faced with a problem or conflict and not **if** we are faced with a problem or conflict for a reason. We cannot avoid problems and conflicts with others – sometimes friends have conflicts even though they may be close friends. But, if we choose our words and actions carefully, we can work through problems without hurting other people.

Even if you are already a good communicator, you might learn about a new skill, improve your skills, or learn how to use them even when you are upset or unsure of what to say.



**TIP**

Break up this section by asking questions (e.g., Do you think you could build a sturdy building with only a hammer? Would you need other tools?).

## SKILLS FOR HEALTHY COMMUNICATION:

1. Transition into a discussion focused on the skills for healthy communication.

**SAY:** We are now going to focus on some specific skills for healthy communication. These nonverbal and verbal skills for healthy communication can help us to have more positive conversations with others, avoid conflicts or problems with others, and can also help us when we are faced with a problem or conflict. We are going to go over a list of 6 skills for healthy communication.

2. Begin with staying in control of feelings.

**SAY:** Let's begin our discussion with the nonverbal skills. One of the first things to keep in mind when communicating is that we need to stay in control of feelings. We discussed this in our last session. Why do you think this is listed as a healthy communication skill?

- Allow several students to respond.
- If not mentioned by students, emphasize the following:
  - ◆ If we let feelings take control, we may not think clearly or communicate our thoughts and feelings in the most appropriate way.
  - ◆ **If needed, it is important to take some time to calm down before having the conversation. Students can use the calming skills from the previous session.**

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3. Continue the discussion of the nonverbal communication skills by discussing eye contact.

**SAY:** *The second nonverbal skill is to make eye contact. **Too little eye contact shows that you are not interested, and too much eye contact can make things uncomfortable. The right amount shows** that you are listening and shows the other person that what they say is important. The right amount feels comfortable for both people. Let's pretend that you are talking to someone but they will not look at you or they stare at you without blinking. How would each of these make you feel?*

- Note that eye contact may not be possible in every conversation. Sometimes it might be too dangerous to make eye contact – such as when people are in the car and talking or walking and talking. In these cases, eye contact may not be possible but other nonverbal cues (e.g., saying “uh huh” or “yes”) can still let the other person know that they are paying attention.

4. Continue the discussion of the nonverbal communication skills by discussing gestures and facial expressions.

**SAY:** *The next nonverbal skill is to watch your gestures and facial expressions. Our bodies and faces communicate a lot! Messages are sent when we see someone crossing their arms, shaking their head, pointing to something, tapping their feet, smiling, or rolling their eyes. These are just a few examples.*

- Provide examples, if necessary.

**SAY:** *Does anyone have any questions about the nonverbal skills?*

- Allow students to ask questions and provide answers as needed.

5. Discuss the verbal skills that are important in healthy communication, starting with tone of voice.

**SAY:** *The first verbal skill is to watch your tone of voice. This goes along with staying calm, which we talked about already. Your tone of voice can convey lots of information, from disinterest to excitement to anger.*

*If you raise your voice or use a sarcastic tone, others may be less likely to listen to you, and it may make them feel badly.*

- Ask for a student volunteer who is willing to demonstrate the impact of tone of voice.
- Once a volunteer has been selected, demonstrate how different tones of voice can change the way a similar message is interpreted by another person.
  - ◆ Demonstrate yelling. Yell, “Are you doing okay?”

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- ◆ Demonstrate sarcasm. Sarcastically say, “Are you doing okay?”
- ◆ Demonstrate a neutral tone of voice. Calmly say, “Are you doing okay?”

**ASK:** How did those different tones of voice make you feel?

- Allow the volunteer student to respond.

6. Continue the discussion of verbal communication skills by discussing active listening.

**SAY:** The second verbal skill is to listen actively. Active listening is a way of showing others that we are listening. It is a way of showing respect. The more we listen, the more the other person will listen to us.

We can actively listen by doing a few things. *First*, active listening means that we take steps to understand what the other person is saying. We can do this by rephrasing what has been said. You could say something like, “It sounds like you are saying...” or “I think what you are saying is...”

*Second*, active listening means that we take turns talking. We do this to make sure that both people in the conversation have a chance to express their views. If you remember from the role-play, it does not feel very good to have someone interrupt you or do all of the talking.

*Third*, active listening means that we ask questions about what is being said and how the other person feels. This shows that we are interested in what the other person is saying. It also helps us understand what is being said. We can how someone else may be feeling by noticing how they look or what they do (e.g., frowns, smiles, clenched fists, etc. communicate a great deal!). But, these are just clues, and the best way to find out how someone is feeling and thinking is to ask them.

- Provide an example that highlights the importance of asking questions.

**SAY:** Asking questions also helps us get the full story and can keep us from jumping to conclusions.

For example, let’s say that you have been waiting at the park for your friend. He finally shows up, 30 minutes late. You are feeling angry and frustrated. If you let your feelings take control and you are not calm or thinking clearly, you might think or say, “He does not care about anyone but himself.” < ask students for other examples of what they might think. >. But, if you first calmed down and then asked questions, such as, “What happened that made you so late?” you might learn that there is a good reason for him being late.

Jumping to conclusions can lead directly to conflicts.

- Provide additional examples, if necessary.



**TIP**

Remind students that it is important to watch their tones of voice when asking questions!

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- If time permits, ask students if they have ever experienced someone jumping to conclusions before hearing their sides of the story or point of view. Follow-up by asking how they felt in the situation.
7. Continue with a discussion of the verbal skills that are important in healthy communication, by discussing “I” statements.

**SAY:** Let’s move on to the last skill for healthy verbal communication, which is to express your feelings. An important part of communicating is being able to express how the situation is affecting us without blaming the other person. Let’s think about this. Has anyone ever said to you, “You should not be angry,” “You need to stop doing that”? I do not know about you, but when I feel like someone is being critical or blaming me for something, I feel hurt and angry and say something in my defense. Using “I” messages and starting our sentences with, “I feel…” is one way to explain how the situation is affecting us without placing blame or criticizing the other person. People are more likely to respond in a positive way when we use “I” messages because we are speaking for ourselves and how we feel and not trying to blame or put down the other person.

We are going to do a short activity, “I Am Important!,” to help us understand what “I” statements are and how to make them. We will read over an example, and then work together as a class to change “you” statements into “I” statements.

**SAY:** The first statement is: Your brother’s music is loud and making it hard for you to study. You say, “Marco, you only think about yourself!”

There is an example “I” statement already filled in: I feel frustrated when you put your music so loud because it is hard to study.

- Check-in to see if students have any questions.

**ASK:** Let’s try one that is blank. The second statement is: Your friend Chaz said that he really wanted to see a certain movie. You say, “Chaz, you always get what you want. You make every single decision!”

How could you change this into an “I” statement so that your feelings and views are better communicated?

- Allow several students to respond.
- Example response: I feel frustrated when you make decisions without talking to me first because I would like to have a say in what we do.

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**ASK:** The third statement is: Your dating partner said that he or she did not feel like hanging out today. You had planned on going out for lunch. You say, "You are horrible! You do not even care about me."

How could you change this into an "I" statement so that your feelings and views are better communicated?

- Allow several students to respond.
- Example response: I feel sad when you cancel plans because I was really looking forward to seeing you.

8. Summarize the activity and the skills for healthy communication.

**SAY:** Great job with making "I" statements. Remember that "I" statements are a way to express how we feel, and these type of statements make expressing how we feel easier because we are just talking about ourselves.

One final thing that we have to think about with healthy communication is that our verbal and nonverbal messages must match – this means that our facial expressions and body language should be consistent with what we are trying to say. Let's pretend that Andre is feeling annoyed that his mom will not let him go to the park with friends. He sits with his arms crossed, teeth clenched, and a scowl on his face, and says, "I am not mad!" What do you think – do you believe what he is saying?

Andre said he is not mad, but the nonverbal messages paint a very different picture – based on the nonverbal clues (e.g., crossed arms, scowl on face, clenched teeth).

<Demonstrate this or another situation that demonstrates a mismatch between nonverbal and verbal communication.>