






The Art of Communication

Activity 4-1	What's New?	 10-15 minutes
Activity 4-2	Optional Warm-up Activity: The Telephone Game	 10-15 minutes
Activity 4-3	What Is Communication?	 30-40 minutes
Activity 4-4	One-Way/Two-Way Communication	 20-25 minutes
Activity 4-5	Active Listening	
Activity 4-6	Stating Your Needs	 35-35 minutes

Optional Activities

Activity **4-7** **Parents’
“Communication Traps”**  30-45 minutes

Activity **4-8** **Listening to
Understand**  30-45 minutes

Activity **4-9** **Through a Child’s Eyes**  15-20 minutes

Activity **4-10** **Feedback/Wrap-up**  10-15 minutes

Key Concepts

- Communication involves sending and receiving messages. We communicate both with verbal messages (our words and how we say them) and with nonverbal messages (our facial and bodily expressions).
- To avoid miscommunication, we use *feedback*. That is, the listener tells the speaker what he or she heard so that the speaker can correct any misunderstanding.
- An important skill in communication is *active listening*. This involves paying attention to nonverbal cues and to the feelings behind the words. Active listening keeps the speaker engaged in the conversation.
- *Assertive communication* expresses feelings and needs in a way that is direct and nonjudgmental; it enables the speaker to take responsibility for what he or she wants. Using “I” statements is the basis of assertive communication.
- Young children learn how to communicate by watching and imitating their parents’ verbal and nonverbal communication styles. Parents need to be aware of how their ways of communicating with each other affect their children.
- Because young children have a limited vocabulary, they often communicate their feelings and needs through their behavior as well as through nonverbal gestures. Parents need to “tune in” to what young children are trying to communicate through their actions as well as their words.

Materials Checklist

Activity 4-3 **What Is Communication?**

- Newsprint
 - Marker
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Activity 4-4 **One-Way/Two-Way Communication**

- Handout, “Sample Design”
 - Paper and pencil (for everyone)
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Activity 4-5 **Active Listening**

- Handout, “Good Listening Skills Checklist”
- Prepared index cards (one card per pair)
- Newsprint
- Marker

Activity 4-6 Stating Your Needs

- Leader Resources, “Different Styles of Communication” and “Suggestions for Assertive Communication”
- Handout, “Stating Your Needs”
- Pencils (for everyone)
- Newsprint
- Markers

Activity 4-7 Parents’ “Communication Traps”

- Leader Resource, “Parents’ Communication Traps”
- Newsprint
- Marker

Activity 4-8 Listening to Understand

- Leader Resource, “Communication Situations”
- Handout, “Suggestions for Listening with Care and Understanding”
- Newsprint
- Markers

What's New?

Purpose: To remind the fathers of what they talked about in Session 3, using the discussion questions to prompt their reactions.

Materials: None.

Time: 15-30 minutes.

Planning Note: Tailor the following discussion questions to focus on the specific ideas that the men shared in Session 3. If they expressed a lot of strong emotions about their male roles, summarize their general feelings, and clarify any themes that emerged. This will help members who missed the session to feel connected to the group.

Using the discussion questions, ask for volunteers to share their reactions to last week's session. Try to get a balance between positive and negative experiences, making sure that feedback is constructive. If the men have a great many reactions to the last session, tell them that you want to give everyone a chance to speak and therefore will limit them to one comment each.

▼ Discussion Questions

1. Would someone volunteer to describe what we discussed in the last session?
2. What ideas about manhood did you gain from the last session?
3. In the time since we last met, did you have any moments when you thought about who you are as a man? What were your thoughts?
4. What have you learned about the men in this group whose ethnic or cultural backgrounds are different from yours?
5. Do you have anything to say about the last session that was not already discussed?

Optional Warm-up Activity

The Telephone Game

Purpose: To help participants understand how messages get distorted when people don't listen effectively. To help parents recognize the importance of active listening.

Materials: None.

Time: 15 minutes.

Planning Note: Session 3 offers a variety of ways to practice basic communication skills and active listening. The optional activities focus on communication with children; use Activities 4-7 through 4-9 if many group members have regular contact with their children.

Procedure: Begin by having all the participants sit in a circle. Tell them that you are going to whisper something into the ear of the man on your left. Then instruct that man to whisper the *same* message to the man on his left. Continue this process until the whispered message reaches the last person, who then says out loud what he was told.

Repeat this activity twice. The first time send a “nonsense” message (for example, “Today in California two out of five people are wearing three earrings in their left ear; at least one earring is a diamond stud”). Next, follow this by a real or “sense” sentence — something that is important or relevant to the group and will evoke strong feelings (such as “Racism makes raising children much harder for parents of children of color than for other parents”).

Use the following questions to discuss what happened in the activity.

▼ Discussion Questions

1. What happened when the group repeated the message around the circle? How much did the message get distorted?
2. Which of the two sentences got changed more? (Follow this up by asking, “Do we listen better when something is important to us and when it makes sense to us?”)
3. What lessons did you learn about communication from this activity?

What Is Communication?

Purpose: To define communication and its essential components. To emphasize the importance of feedback in effective communication.

Materials: Newsprint and marker.

Time: 30-40 minutes.

Procedure: Begin by telling participants that today the group will explore communication — what it is, what makes it easier, and what makes it harder. Ask the men to brainstorm for a definition of communication. Their list might include such behavior as hearing, talking, speaking clearly, asking questions, making facial expressions, getting a point across, understanding what someone else is saying, and so on.

Explain that *communication* is the process of sending and receiving messages. All the items on their list are steps in the process. Point to the following diagram, which you have prepared on newsprint:

Sender → Message → Receiver

Explain that, when people communicate, one person (the sender) sends a message (a statement, a question, a feeling, an idea, etc.) to another person (the receiver). Next, have the men consider this conversation between two workers:

Joe: “Can I borrow your hammer?”

Pete: “How long do you need to use it?”

Joe: “Until I finish building these stairs.”

Pete: “Sorry, man. I’m going to be needing the hammer myself as soon as I come back from my break.”

Ask participants how well these two men seemed to communicate. Point out that the conversation was straightforward and that Pete did a good job of learning how long Joe needed the hammer before he responded to the question.

Next, consider this conversation between Daryl and his friend Cindy:

Cindy: “Do you want to go to my mother’s house for dinner?”

Daryl: “Okay.”

Cindy: “But do you really want to go?”

Daryl: (in an angry voice) “You’re driving me crazy! Why don’t you make up your mind? First, you say you want to go. Now you aren’t sure.”

Ask participants to explain what happened in this conversation. What did Daryl think Cindy was saying when she asked, “Do you want to go to my mother’s house for dinner?” (It seems that he interpreted her question as a statement of her own desire to go. But it turns out that she really wanted to know how *he* felt about it. She was open to discussing the idea, but he thought she had already made up her mind — that she wanted to go and was asking him to go, too. Therefore, he thought that she was being irrational, and asked, “Why don’t you make up your mind?” Although she may have felt that he was falsely accusing her, she had never actually said what she wanted to do.)

Point out that communication problems arise because people are unique; they can experience the same conversation in completely different ways. In addition, men and women often have different communication styles. Men tend to come right out and say what they want, while women tend to reach a decision jointly by talking about an issue before deciding. One style is not “right” or “better”; they are just different. But as Daryl and Cindy show, different styles of communication can lead to misunderstandings and conflict.

Explain that the best way to avoid miscommunication is to tell the sender what you heard and to give the sender a chance to correct you. This is called *feedback*. For example, Daryl might have said, “Are you saying that you want to go to your mother’s?” or “It’s okay with me, but only if you want to.”

After reviewing this communication path, ask the following questions to discuss the role that feedback plays in communication.

▼ **Discussion Questions**

1. Is there anyone with whom you find it easy to communicate? Why do you think the two of you communicate well?
2. Is there anyone with whom you have a hard time communicating? Why do you think the two of you miscommunicate?
3. Would somebody like to tell us what he heard so far today about communication?

As the men are responding, model feedback by asking them questions to clarify what you are hearing. Ask them to state what you (the sender) said to them (the message) and what they (the receivers) heard. Tell them that they can ask you questions (get feedback) to clarify what they think they heard.

One-Way/Two-Way Communication

Purpose: To demonstrate to participants the importance of asking for clarification and giving feedback in effective communication.

Materials: Handout, “Sample Design”; paper and pencil (for everyone).

Time: 20 minutes.

Procedure: Tell the participants that you want to illustrate what they’ve been learning about communication. Explain that you want them to participate in a short communication activity in which they will discover how easy (or how difficult) it might be to follow another person’s instructions. Give the following instructions:

Pair up with another person, and sit back-to-back. One person in each pair will be a “sender”; the other will be a “receiver.” Senders will be given a drawing, and receivers will get a blank sheet of paper.

The senders will try to explain to the receivers how to draw the design that is on their sheet of paper.

The receivers cannot talk at all — asking no questions and making no comments.

Have the men pair off, and assign the roles of sender and receiver. Give each sender a copy of the handout “Sample Design.” Give each receiver a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. Instruct the senders not to let the receivers see the design. The senders will give oral instructions about how to draw the design. Emphasize again that the receivers *cannot* ask questions or get feedback. Tell the senders to describe the design in any way they choose. Finally, warn the pairs that they will have more work to do after the receivers have finished drawing, so the senders should not show the drawing until you tell them to do so.

When the receivers have finished drawing, briefly discuss the activity. Ask:

- What was the experience like for the senders?
- What was the experience like for the receivers?
- Senders, how close did the receiver come to drawing the design correctly?
(Make sure that the senders do not yet show the design to the receivers.)

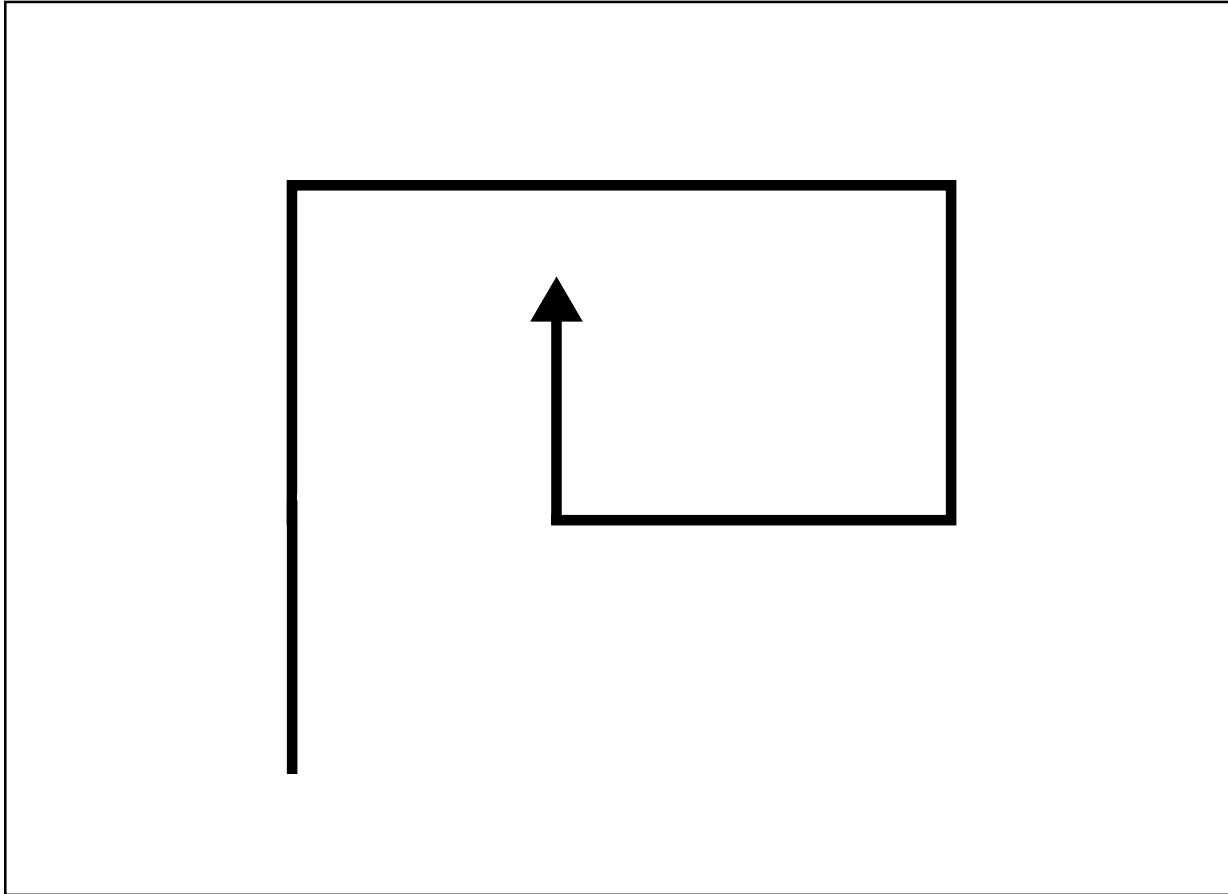
Next, give a clean sheet of paper to each receiver. Instruct the pairs to repeat the activity, but this time allow the receivers to ask questions and get feedback about what they are supposed to be drawing.

When everyone has finished, compare the designs that the receivers first drew with the ones that they finally drew. Use the following questions to discuss the activity.

▼ Discussion Questions

1. Which of the two experiences was more difficult? Why? Do the senders and the receivers agree about this?
2. What caused communication to break down? (Participants will probably comment about not being able to ask questions the first time.)
3. Which experience took longer? (Often, the second experience took longer. If so, explain that communicating effectively — providing and getting feedback — sometimes involves work.)
4. What did you learn from this activity? (Emphasize that asking for and getting feedback increases a listener's chances of understanding a message correctly.)
5. In what ways can you relate this activity to other communication situations in your life? (Ask for examples of how feedback can improve communication with partners, children, employers, etc.)

Sample Design



Active Listening

Purpose: To increase effective listening skills.

Materials: Handout, “Good Listening Skills Checklist”; prepared index cards (one card per pair); newsprint and marker.

Time: 40-50 minutes.

Planning Note: Prepare index cards for this activity by writing the following instructions on the front of the cards and numbering them 1, 2, or 3 on the reverse side. Each pair of men will need one index card.

1. Listen attentively to your partner for about a minute. Then begin to get distracted. Look at your watch or the clock, glance around, drop your pen — but don’t be obvious about this.
2. Pay attention to your partner, but disagree with everything that he says. Interrupt while he is talking, and tell him what you think he should do — whether or not he asks for your advice. Point your finger, and try to be aggressive.
3. Listen to your partner carefully. Without talking, try to show him that you understand. Look him in the eye, and pay careful attention. *Do not speak.*

Number 3 is an example of good listening skills. The listener pays attention, makes eye contact, and refrains from speaking or interrupting — which are all good skills in “active listening.” Distinguish between the silence of active listening — which communicates to the speaker that the listener is attentive and interested — from a silence that conveys boredom, disinterest, being judgmental, etc.

Procedure: Tell participants that in this activity they will learn about listening skills. Explain that they will work in pairs, with one person as the speaker and the other as the listener. The speaker will talk about some recent problem he has had — some conflict with a partner, a boss, or a friend, for example. The listener will be given an index card with special instructions to follow that demonstrate the different styles of listening. Thus, the listener’s response will not be influenced by what the speaker is saying. (The listener’s response should not be taken personally, because he is following the instructions on the index card.)

Divide the participants into pairs, and have them choose roles (or you can assign them). Instruct the speakers to think of some problem that they feel comfortable discussing (nothing too personal or intimate). Then distribute the index cards to the listeners, and tell them not to share the instructions with the speakers. Begin the activity, explaining to the pairs that you will stop them after three minutes.

At the end of three minutes, bring the group together, and ask the speakers to describe their partners’ listening skills. Did the speakers feel that they were being understood? Why or why not? Ask the listeners how they felt in their roles.

Now ask some of the listeners to read aloud the instructions on their cards. Remind the speakers that their partner’s behavior was influenced by the instructions on the cards, and not by anything that the speakers said. Now, brainstorm with the group to discover some of the things that a listener can do to “hurt” or to “help” the listening process, starting with things that “hurt.”

Write the following words on newsprint, and add the group’s responses under the appropriate heading.

Hurts Listening

Looking away
 Interrupting
 Saying something that doesn’t
 relate to the speaker’s point
 Acting distracted

Helps Listening

Making eye contact
 Acting concerned
 Asking clarifying questions
 Providing feedback

Ask the men to share their own examples of when a listener responded to them in ways that hurt or didn't help. For example, how did they feel when someone seemed to judge what they were saying or became defensive? Ask what kind of *nonverbal* messages they have received which told them that someone was not listening or was judging them.

After completing the list of things that can hurt listening, brainstorm about behaviors that can help listening. (Make sure that the information on the handout "Good Listening Skills Checklist" is included in the list of things that help listening.)

Explain to the men that *active listening* involves more than just hearing what someone is saying. Active listeners try to understand the *feelings* underneath what the speaker says, and they try to show the speaker they are interested.

Say to the men: "Active listeners concentrate on what the other person is saying. Don't think ahead to what you can say as a comeback. To check whether you listened well, repeat the speaker's comments in your own words without adding any of your own opinions. For example, suppose that Tyrone is talking about the maternal grandmother of his child and says, "Melissa's mother is such a pain. She gets on my back as soon as I walk in the door." A listener, Ike, might respond by saying, "Give Mrs. Johnson a break, man. She does so much for you. You couldn't make it without her." If you were Tyrone, what would you think of Ike's response? Was Ike an active listener? What do *you* think Tyrone is feeling? How well did Ike tune in to Tyrone's feelings?"

The group's responses should indicate that Ike was way off base as a listener. As a result, Tyrone is going to be even more frustrated after talking with Ike. Even if Ike has a point, Tyrone is not going to be able to hear it. Ask the group, "What could Ike have said to Tyrone to show that he was really trying to understand Tyrone's feelings?" New responses for Ike might include, "So, I guess you feel that Mrs. Johnson harasses you, right?"

Point out that *paraphrasing* the speaker's message is a good way to test your understanding of the message. If you misunderstood, the speaker can correct you and explain things more clearly. And if you did understand, the speaker will know that you are really paying attention.

Have the men regroup into their original pairs (from Activity 4-4). Again, one person is the speaker, and the other is the listener. The speaker should talk about another recent problem he has had, and this time the listener should use the active listening skills he has learned. Remind the men to use both verbal and nonverbal skills in communicating.

After three minutes, use the following questions to discuss active listening.

▼ Discussion Questions

1. Speakers, how well did your partners listen? Did they make you feel understood? How? What nonverbal messages did they give you?
2. Listeners, was it difficult to be an active listener? What was easy or hard about it?
3. In what situations could you use active listening to improve your communication?
4. How could active listening help you in communicating with your children? (Hint: Think of when your children feel upset or have a problem to solve.) How could active listening be useful with the mother of your children?

Good Listening Skills Checklist

- ✓ Act concerned about what the speaker has to say.
- ✓ Give the speaker your full attention.
- ✓ Make direct eye contact, if you feel comfortable doing so.
- ✓ Lean forward toward the speaker.
- ✓ Nod or shake your head in response to the speaker's comments.
- ✓ Use brief verbal responses that indicate you are listening, such as "yes," "I see," "go on," etc.
- ✓ Change your facial expression as appropriate (for example, to show concern or excitement).
- ✓ Get feedback. Test how well you understand the speaker by telling him what you think he's saying.
- ✓ Try to figure out the feelings beneath the speaker's words. Ask a question to determine whether you are correct about how the speaker is feeling. For example, "Are you nervous about going to court?" "Are you bummed out, man?"
- ✓ Don't interrupt, judge, or criticize the speaker.



Stating Your Needs

Purpose: To help the fathers evaluate how they communicate their ideas and needs to others. To give participants an opportunity to practice communicating assertively.

Materials: Leader Resources, “Different Styles of Communication” and “Suggestions for Assertive Communication”; Handout, “Stating Your Needs”; pencils (for everyone); newsprint and markers.

Time: 35-45 minutes.

Planning Note: Before starting this activity, copy the Leader Resource “Different Styles of Communication” onto newsprint. On a separate sheet of newsprint, write the six “assertive” skills listed in the Leader Resource “Suggestions for Assertive Communication.” Post both of these in the front of the room.

Procedure: Remind the men that so far in Session 4 they have practiced active listening in order to improve communication with the people in their lives. This activity looks at how we communicate our needs to other people. Ask the fathers, “How effective do you think you are in telling someone else what you want or need?” “What gets in the way of your being effective?” Tell them that one way to get what they need and want is to communicate *assertively*: to state clearly what they need or want without putting the other person down.

State the two basic rules of assertive communication:

1. Express your feelings and needs.
2. Express these in a way that is direct and nonjudgmental and that enables you to take personal responsibility. (Use “I” statements.)

Tell the fathers that you would like to compare assertive communication with two other styles that do not work so well: passive communication and aggressive communication. Then review the three styles of communication described in the Leader Resource “Different Styles of Communication.” Ask the men to think about which style of communicating is most like how they relate to others.

After you have defined the three different styles of communication, tell the men that now they will practice using assertive communication. Give them the handout “Stating Your Needs,” and go through the four steps of assertive communication, using examples from your own life. When you are sure that everyone understands the four steps, ask the men to pair off. Instruct the pairs to take turns being a speaker and a listener. Each speaker will have about three minutes to communicate something that he wants or needs, using the four-step model outlined in the handout. The man who is the listener should assess how well the speaker used the four steps and should offer *constructive* criticism and suggestions for improving his assertive communication skills.

After three minutes, tell the men to switch roles and repeat the activities. When everyone has had a turn being the speaker, reconvene the large group. Discuss the men’s reactions to this activity by asking the following questions.

▼ Discussion Questions

1. What are the three different styles of communication that we talked about? What are your thoughts about each style of communicating?
2. How easy (or how difficult) was it for you to use the assertive style of communication?
3. How well do you think assertive communication would work with your children?
4. How well do you think assertive communication would work with other people in your life, such as your friends, partner, and employer?

Leader Resource

Different Styles of Communication

Passive Style: Giving in to others too easily without making a strong enough effort to see that your *own* wishes, thoughts, and feelings are heard.

Aggressive Style: Pushing for what you want without regard for other people's feelings. (This may involve putting people down, accusing, threatening, blaming, yelling, judging, and fighting.)

Assertive Style: Standing up for yourself and expressing your true feelings, while making an effort to be considerate of other people's feelings.

Suggestions for Assertive Communication

1. Maintain eye contact.
2. Maintain a good body posture.
3. Speak clearly and firmly.
4. Don't whine or use an apologetic tone.
5. Use hand gestures and facial expressions for emphasis.
6. Use "I" statements. (Tell the person what you feel and need and want; say why the person's behavior is a problem for you. *Example:* "I get angry when you come home late, because it messes up my plans.")

Stating Your Needs

1. When you _____
Describe what the listener is doing that makes you feel uncomfortable or good.

2. I feel _____
Describe your feeling.

3. Because _____
Tell the listener why you feel the way you do.

4. So could we (or you) _____
Suggest a solution, or state what you want.

Optional Activity **Parents’ “Communication Traps”**

Purpose: To help parents identify the communication patterns they use in response to their children’s behavior.

Materials: Leader Resource, “Parents’ Communication Traps”; newsprint and marker.

Time: 15-20 minutes.

Planning Note: Before this activity, copy onto separate sheets of newsprint the seven terms defined in the Leader Resource “Parents’ Communication Traps.”

This activity will help the fathers think about the things they may want to change in how they communicate with their children. It is important to keep the mood “light,” allowing everyone to acknowledge his patterns of communication without feeling threatened or embarrassed. If you feel that the group might not be supportive enough, postpone doing this activity.

Procedure: Begin by telling the men that this activity will explore the various styles of communication that they have experienced in their families. Remind them that in earlier sessions they focused on what it was like growing up in their particular families. They talked about their values and the people who helped shape those values, including their mothers and fathers. Make the point that how our family members communicated with each other greatly influences how we communicate with each other and with our children.

Remind the fathers of the definition of communication (Activity 4-3) and that it involves both verbal and nonverbal messages. Ask them to think for a minute about how their parents communicated with them when they were children. What words or phrases stand out in their minds? What nonverbal signals did they get from their parents to show happiness, anger, disappointment, concern, etc.?

Now go around the room, asking each father to give one word that summarizes his parents' (or caregiver's) communication style. (Such words might include "The Look," "Silence," "The Screamer," "The Preacher.") If the group has trouble starting, offer a word to describe your own parents' style of communication. When participants give their descriptive words, record them on newsprint.

Post on newsprint the terms from the Leader Resource "Parents' Communication Traps." Tell the men that you are going to read a description of these words, and then each of them should stand near the word that best describes his style of communicating with his children. Remind them that nobody is a perfect parent and that all parents fall into one or more of these "communication traps" at various times. When everyone has selected a word that describes his "trap," ask the following questions.

▼ Discussion Questions

1. What is it like to admit your "communication trap" to the group?
2. Who else has chosen the same word as you? Can one of you give the group an example of how parents communicate in this role? (For example, what words or gestures do you tend to use over and over again with your children?)
3. Which of these words describes how your parents communicated with you as a child? As an adult, do you communicate with your children as your parents did with you? How is your style like or different from your parents'?
4. How do your children usually respond to you when you fall into your "communication trap"?
5. Do you use this style of communication with anybody other than your children? Who?
6. What would you like to change about how you communicate with your children? With others?
7. What do you think you would have to do to change how you communicate with your children?

Leader Resource

Parents' Communication Traps

The Commander-in-Chief. Parent keeps things under control and demands that the child get rid of the negative feelings and “shape up.” Orders, commands, and threats are the tools used by the Commander-in-Chief to maintain order and to keep the upper hand.

The Preacher. The Preacher preaches to the children to get them to behave. He or she uses *Shoulds* a lot, “You should do this” and “You should do that,” making the child feel guilty. The preacher is very concerned that the child have the *proper* feelings. This is the parent who says, “Shame on you, you should know better. What would the neighbors think?”

The Know-It-All. Parents who play this role try to show the child that they “have been there” and therefore they know the right answers to everything. These parents lecture, advise, and direct their children, showing that they are superior to their children. This is the parent who says, “I told you so.”

The Judge. This parent has already decided that the child is guilty without a trial. Judges believe that they are right and the child is wrong. (Or that adults are right and children do not have a say.) This is the parent who says, “I knew you would. . . .”

The Critic. The critic tends to use put-downs, name calling, and jokes to handle his children's behavior. This is the parent who says, “You are always . . .”; “Why can't you ever. . . ?” “You're so dumb, stupid. . . .”

The Psychologist. The psychologist tries to analyze everything. This parent wants to hear all the details so that he or she can be in a better position to set the child straight. This is the parent who analyzes and diagnoses everything the child says and does — looking for some hidden meaning. This is the parent who asks, “What do you feel about this?” a hundred times a day.

The Worrier. This is the parent who tries to make everything right all of the time. This parent is always asking what’s wrong, makes “mountains out of mole hills.” This is the parent who never lets his or her child out of sight, who fights the child’s battles, and does not believe his or her child can do wrong. This is the parent who always says, “What did so and so do to you?”

Adapted from Dinkmeyer and McKay, *The Parent Handbook*, 1982.

Optional Activity **Listening to Understand**

Purpose: To help the fathers think about their verbal and nonverbal communication styles. To increase their ability to listen effectively to each other and to their children.

Materials: Leader Resource, “Communication Situations”; Handout, “Suggestions for Listening with Care and Understanding”; newsprint and markers.

Time: 30-45 minutes.

Planning Note: This activity requires role-playing situations where the fathers take on the role of a noncustodial parent; a child (son or daughter); and/or a girlfriend. Before conducting this activity, review the ground rules for role-playing activities:

1. Be as realistic as possible (do not exaggerate the role).
2. Consider a wide range of responses (even if they are responses you would not ordinarily use).

When the original actors finish their roles, allow other participants to offer suggestions (or offer some possible solutions the group might not have thought of).

Procedure: Begin by telling the participants that in this activity they will practice listening to each other in a new way. Besides responding to what someone says through words, a good listener also responds to the speaker’s body language, tone of voice, and facial gestures. As they learned in Activity 2-5, this type of listening is called *active listening*, which means working hard to understand what the speaker is saying and *feeling*.

Ask whether anyone has ever been in a conversation where he felt that the other person was saying one thing but meaning or wanting something else. Ask for volun-

teers to give you examples of this. What does it feel like to talk with someone who does this? What do you do or say to get the person to be clear about what he or she wants to say? (For example, suppose your partner says, “Oh, it’s OK. It’s OK. I don’t mind” — when you know that she is clearly upset and angry.)

Remind the group of Activity 4-4, in which they practiced giving *feedback*. In order to understand what someone really means, it is often necessary to tell the speaker what you heard and then to ask him or her to correct your understanding.

Tell the fathers that now they are going to sharpen their listening skills by role-playing some typical situations that happen between partners or between parents and children. You are going to describe a situation to them, and then two men will role-play that scene. One person will have to figure out what the other person is trying to communicate.

Read a situation from the Leader Resource “Communication Situations.” Choose a situation that somebody in the group has experienced, or create one of your own. Ask two fathers to volunteer to role-play the situation; one will be the speaker, and the other will be the listener. They will have three minutes to act out the scene. Instruct the speaker about how you want him to behave in the situation. The listener’s job is to try to figure out what the speaker is saying and feeling. The listener should use both verbal and nonverbal signals to give feedback about what he is hearing the speaker say.

The rest of the group should listen attentively to what is going on between the two actors, so that they can evaluate how well the speaker communicated his feelings and how well the listener understood the speaker. Reconvene the group after about three minutes of each role play. Then use the following questions to discuss what happened.

▼ **Discussion Questions**

1. Speaker, how well did the listener listen? Did you feel understood? Did the listener understand the feelings you were experiencing? What nonverbal signs told you that the listener was understanding your message?
2. Listener, was it difficult to figure out what the speaker was trying to tell you? What was easy or hard to understand? Did the speaker's words match his feelings? If not, how did you get the speaker to admit what feelings were behind his words?
3. For those of you who were observers, what did the listener do that seemed helpful to the speaker? What did the listener do that may have made it hard for the speaker to communicate his feelings?

After the group has watched a few role plays, distribute the handout "Suggestions for Listening with Care and Understanding." Go through the suggestions, asking the men to add ideas that they think may improve communication.

Leader Resource

Communication Situations

SITUATION 1: Father and eight-year-old daughter. The father is three hours late picking up his daughter because he had to work overtime. He feels very bad about being late, especially because he had promised to take her to the circus, and now they've missed the last performance. He walks in the door and sees his daughter looking out the window waiting for him. She looks as though she's been crying.

Daughter's role: You are really disappointed that your father showed up late, but you don't want him to know that you are hurt, so you pretend that you don't care.

Father's role: Try to get your daughter to tell you what she is feeling.

SITUATION 2: Father and girlfriend/spouse. You are visiting your mother with your five-year-old son and your girlfriend. Your mom has been a great support to you. Anytime you have needed a babysitter, she's been there to help you out. Although you've offered to pay her, she has always refused. The one thing that bothers you is that she is always criticizing the way you raise your son. You are afraid to say anything to her, because you need her to watch your son, and you don't want to get her angry. Your son accidentally breaks something in your mother's house, and she starts yelling at you to "mind him."

Father's role: Your mother asks you why you have a face on. You would like to tell her to mind her own business, and yet you find yourself telling her that nothing is wrong. Instead, you end up yelling at your girlfriend.

Girlfriend's role: Try to figure out what your partner is feeling. Tell him what you think is going on.

SITUATION 3: Father and his children’s mother. You and your children’s mother are trying to work out a schedule for you to visit your two children. You want to see the children more often, but your work schedule changes so often that you cannot commit to any particular days. You are hoping to arrange visits week by week, depending on your work schedule. But you don’t know how to approach your children’s mother about this because she is still very angry about your separation. Whenever you need to talk with her about the kids, her anger gets in the way of her ability to listen to you.

Father’s role: Try to tell your children’s mother what kind of visitation schedule you need and why.

Children’s mother’s role: You are angry at your children’s father, yet you realize that he has been trying to be a good father. Try to manage your anger as you listen to his request.

SITUATION 4: Father and six-year-old son. Your six-year-old son comes into the house after school and seems really quiet. Unlike his usual noisy behavior, he slips past you and heads straight to the room he shares with his brother. When you realize he is not around, you go into his room and see him lying on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. You ask him what is wrong, and he says, “Nothing, I’m just tired.”

Son’s role: The kids in school have been pushing you around and calling you names. Your father has always told you to defend yourself if anyone bothers you, but these kids are big, and you are really scared. You are afraid that your father will be angry with you for not sticking up for yourself, so you don’t want to tell him what’s been going on.

Father’s role: You know something must be wrong with your son, but he won’t talk to you. Try to help him to tell you what’s bothering him.

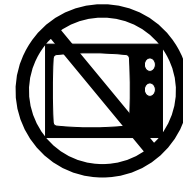
SITUATION 5: Father and seven-year-old daughter. Your seven-year old daughter comes running into the kitchen really excited, yelling, “Daddy! Daddy! Guess what?” while you are hurrying to get out the door for work. (You’re running ten minutes late, and your boss already warned you about being late.) You look at your daughter and see that she is OK, so you say, “Not now, talk to me later.” Your daughter grabs your arm saying, “But Daddy, I want to show you something.” By now you are so frustrated that you push your daughter away and yell, “I told you to get lost. Now beat it!” Your daughter turns and runs out of the room with tears running down her face.

Father’s role: It is now evening, and you want to talk with your daughter about what happened this morning.

Daughter’s role: You feel bad that nobody seems to ever have time to listen to you, but you are worried that your father will get angry again if you tell him this.

Suggestions for Listening with Care and Understanding

1. Stop what you are doing, and look at the speaker.
2. Reduce distractions; turn down the radio or TV.
3. Make direct eye contact, if you feel comfortable doing so. If you are listening to a child, get down to the child's eye level.
4. Nod or shake your head to let the speaker know you are listening.
5. Pay attention to the speaker's body language.
6. Use brief verbal responses that show you are listening, such as "yes," "I see," "go ahead."
7. Tell the speaker what you heard, to test how well you understood what he or she said.
8. Try to figure out the feelings underneath the speaker's words. If the speaker is a child, say what you think the *feeling* is that he or she may be trying to communicate through actions. (For example, "Does your frown mean that you are sad?" or "Did you throw that because you were angry?")
9. Don't interrupt, judge, or criticize the speaker.
10. Tell the speaker how glad you are to listen.



Adapted from *Parent Time Curriculum Guide*, Pace Family Literacy Program, Family Resource Coalition, 200 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1520, Chicago, IL 60604, (312) 341-0900.

Optional Activity Through a Child's Eyes

Purpose: To help fathers think about how they communicate with their children. To help them understand the impact that their behavior has on their children's self-esteem.

Materials: None.

Time: 20 minutes.

Procedure: Begin by asking the men to think about a situation in which they wanted someone to listen who was either too busy or otherwise unwilling or unable to listen. Ask for volunteers to share their experiences. What did it feel like for someone not to listen or to ignore them? Who were they trying to communicate with? What did the nonlistener do? How did this make the speaker feel?

Next, ask the men to think about a situation when they were with a child who was trying to communicate something but they were too busy to listen. Ask them what they thought the child was feeling. What did the child do to get their attention? How did they respond?

Tell the group that you would like to take a few minutes to role-play such a situation. Ask for three volunteers to play three roles: a mother, a father, and their four-year-old son. Read aloud the following scenario, directing the volunteers to act it out. After about three minutes of role play, ask the questions on the next page.

Situation: You've spent the entire day with your four-year-old son. It is 7:30 P.M., an hour before his usual bedtime. The boy's mother has just come by to discuss some financial issues concerning child support payments, and both of you are really upset. In the midst of this serious discussion, your son begins to try to get your attention. You and his mother both try to ignore him, but he keeps whining and pulling on your arm. Eventually you push him out of the room, saying, "We're busy; go play."

▼ Discussion Questions

1. How did each of you feel about your roles?
2. How did each of you communicate your needs?
3. Son, how did it feel to be ignored? What would you have liked your parents to do?
4. What do you think the child was feeling? (Was he worried about his parents' fighting? Did he miss his father and want his attention? Is a four-year-old capable of understanding the parents' needs? What was he trying to accomplish by his behavior?)
5. Parents, how did it feel to be interrupted? What could you have done differently to help your child get what he needed while still proceeding with your conversation?
6. How should parents decide which issues they should talk about in private, as opposed to those they talk about in front of their children?

Feedback/Wrap-up

Begin by asking for a volunteer to summarize what the group talked about and learned in today's session. Ask the following questions.

▼ Discussion Questions

1. Would somebody like to test his new "listening skills" by summarizing what we talked about today?
2. Do you have a different view of communication after participating in this session? If so, how has your view changed?
3. How helpful were the activities about active listening (4-5) and assertive communication (4-6)?
4. Which of the skills and/or techniques that we practiced today do you plan to use in your daily lives?
5. Do you think that these skills and techniques will improve your relationships? If so, how? If not, why?

Tell the fathers that you hope today's session about communication will make a difference in their lives. Admit that it takes time and practice to change one's style of communication, and point out that the peer support group will give them an opportunity to fine-tune their skills. Thank the men for their participation, and remind them of when the next session will meet.