



BETTER COMMUNICATION

It's the Lubricant We Need To Ease Our Living Together

By Carol Doty

Bridging the communication gap between generations is being recognized by American families as a significant challenge. For wholesome, practical, affectionate or secure relationships to exist there must be communication.

In the first century and a half of our nation's history, families were too occupied with the business of providing food, clothing and shelter, and preserving their available tangible resources for difficult days, to concern themselves with psychological and emotional needs.

There Were Chores to Do

Children of the family were useful and essential parts of the effort to provide the daily needs. They were forever busy and aware of their importance as part of the family work

force. There was little need to worry about asking Dad for the family car, or discussing the extension of the curfew hour.

When working near or with a parent, in the house or in the field, there was ample time to discuss things of importance, such as how to carry out the duties of the day. A hard day's labor consumed the energy and the time needed to discuss personal and emotional problems.

That era is past. Urban living separates the adults of the family for most of the day. Husband and wife live their days in entirely different environments. Children are not needed to do household or farming tasks. Often the children themselves are the first to recognize, and be uncomfortable about, the fact that they are members of the family but not working partners, as was true of an earlier age. (One has only to watch youngsters, in their clumsy and inept efforts to help daddy wash the car or clean the swimming pool, to note this youthful urge to be helpful and need-

Today's American family has more leisure, and with leisure comes time and opportunity to think of the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of family life. The middle class family of today — that is, most of us — has moved beyond the point where meeting the day's bare physical necessities took every moment of physical and mental ability. With leisure comes time to explore psychological and emotional needs.

Groups — Not Families

Urban — and even rural — living today emphasizes group activities rather than family activities. Today each member of the family has his own interest group — swimming, youth club, tap dancing, Spanish lessons, hobbies class, baton twirling, music lessons, riding lessons, PTA, bridge and canasta clubs, and social dancing. This segmenting of families has, of itself, helped break down the communication within the family.

This breakdown was pointed up by Arizona homemakers, planning their "family living" program, as they expressed their own concerns: "We cannot get our children to talk with and confide in us." "Why does mother always have to be the go-between for fathers and children?" "It is difficult to have time and privacy for close relationships when we have a husband and several children all demanding our attention at once." "Perhaps we are afraid to talk truthfully, yet easily, with our children." "Parents

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and children really need to know each other better, to study the needs and attitudes of each other."

It was amazing to us, last summer when 4-H members met at The University of Arizona, to learn that the chief concern of these young people was not boy-girl relationships, but parent-child relationships. In fact, one could venture that the parental relationships actually cause young people more concern and grief than do their social relationships within their own age group.

Parents, too, may be in for a surprise. It is easy and natural for parents, in this world, where public and private schools take on much of the role of counseling, to believe that the teenager does not depend on his parent as he should, or did in generations past. The falsity of this view is proven by the young people themselves, in their wistful concerns expressed in counseling and discussion sessions.

Need Parental Backing

During such discussions, teenagers express their desire to please their parents in all areas of their behavior. They are greatly concerned when their parents do not praise their successes, and fail to trust them in social predicaments. They are concerned because the values which they are developing are sometimes in conflict with parental values. Value conflicts create guilt in many teenagers, even as parents feel the young people are willfully challenging their values. In truth, young people must challenge the values of their parents in order to develop values of their own.

Back of many parent-child maladjustments rests the old problem of lack of communication. The lines of communication between parent and child break down. Children, feeling they must strike out toward their own code of values, avoid the hazard of rebuke by not talking to parents. Parents, frustrated by that age old problem of "what the younger generation is coming to," often feel inadequate to talk with their children. Thus, the line of communication is broken.

After awhile the fairly easy frustration of silence seems preferable to the challenge of discussion. Between child and parent, between husband and wife, it just seems easier to go along from day to day, not seeking to resolve unmentioned conflicts by conversation. Each member of the family becomes conditioned to the easy escape of avoiding challenging communication, or candid discussion of

problems and conduct.

Another error is the attitude of the tyrant-parent, the "I've delivered my opinion and the issue is closed" sort of dogmatic assertion which leaves no room for reasonable discussion. The parent puts up the barrier and Junior cannot breach it.

Some Conflict is Helpful

Of course, no family has good communication all the time. None of us has angelic moods 24 hours a day, day after day. Actually, a sharp, emotional argument oftentimes is needed, like a summer storm, to clear the air. Such conflicts actually may be constructive. Things which have needed saying have finally been put into words. Finally there is meaning found in the quotation, "Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the successful resolving of conflict."

Perhaps a few guidelines for family communication are in order:

1. Show understanding. Understanding does not mean over-indulgence. The over-indulgent parent actually may not care intensely for his child. Indulgence beyond reason may indicate the guilty conscience of a parent who is aware of his own failing. (No children are so showered with gifts as those rich little waifs left with a housekeeper while the parents vacation or wind the questing road from one divorce to another). Understanding means firm, thoughtful limits which are understood by other members of the family. They may reflect a family compromise, but they seem fair to the family members.

2. Feel confident about yourself. A parent who likes and feels sure of himself is equipped to accept conflicts in values, and still is able to stick by a comfortable but firm "no" if he believes it necessary. This parent will also have a better relationship with his marriage partner if he possesses self-understanding and confidence.

3. Have an open mind. A parent who is comfortable with himself is not disturbed greatly if his child tells him something that he would rather not hear. The parent can avoid shaming the child, and at the same time, guide him toward a sense of social responsibility.

Get Off That Pedestal

4. Allow a child to experience some of the limitations of his parent. A child expects his parents never to err, and the parent responds by trying to seem perfect in the child's eyes. For communication and respect to exist, to avoid an inevitable letdown, the parent cannot and should not remain on a pedestal. He must

allow the child to see and know the parent's unwise decisions, personal limitations — and also the parent's unfulfilled dreams.

Many a child grows up a knot of frustration and doubt because of his innate knowledge that he cannot possibly live up to the image and expectations of the parent who remains on a pedestal. Often filled with hopelessness, he refuses to try.

5. Both child and parent must be receptive, willing to listen. If parent to parent, parent to child, communication is honest and patient, many problems will never occur.

6. Let the teenager set up a few rules for himself. He might be more strict with himself than his parents would be with him. Remember, in a few years he will be running his own life, and he needs practice in making rules, adhering to them, establishing and living up to a code of values. Also, the person who sets up his own rules is more apt to observe them, as a matter of pride.

7. Allow some time every day alone with each other member of the family. Only five minutes will make a difference in improving family communication. We point to a successful family relationship where the teenage daughter goes to "early session" schools in Tucson, coming home an hour or two earlier than her two brothers. While other mothers were fuming about split sessions, this mother wisely said, "Well, in our family it works out well. When Mary comes home early the two of us, in the house alone, have an hour every day for just plain woman talk." Reciprocally, the father and sons tinker with machines, carpentry and auto repairs in a far corner of the premises reserved solely for "the men folks of the family."

Price of Gregariousness

One of the fees man pays for living in groups — nations, communities and families — is conflict, and conflict itself is part of growth. But better communications — between parent and child, between members of communities and even nations — can help resolve conflict, and lead to mutual understanding and maturity.

HOW SWEET IT ISN'T

The value of the 1964 sugar beet crop in the United States was \$278 million, down \$7 million from the 1963 crop, reports the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Value of the 1964 sugar cane crop was put at \$101 million compared with \$142 million for 1963.