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Family Focus

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As adults we try to learn as much as we can about our computers, smartphones, tablets, televisions and sound systems in order to be able to use them effectively. Many of us attempt to learn a new language, or a skill such as carpentry, golf or bridge. These learning experiences enhance our lives and contribute to our sense of mastery and well-being.

By contrast, learning to communicate effectively may seem like a tedious task, along the lines of learning to floss our teeth effectively or figuring out how to remove carpet stains. Boring! So I offer you just two of many possible tips to consider in the hope that seeing the word "communicate" here won't make your eyes glaze over.

First tip: Take a positive approach. It would be highly unusual not to have occasional adverse reactions to family members' words, behaviors or attitudes. Many people choose to complain to the person (or about the person), rather than taking the more positive approach of asking for what they would like. Complaining or criticizing often sets up

an angry and defensive reaction from the other person. Here are a few examples from families I have worked with (names have been changed, of course), and some better alternatives:

Mom to daughter:

"Carly, you always leave your clothes scattered around the house. I'm sick of telling you to clean up after yourself."

Better: "Carly, please remember to pick up your clothes before you go to bed. You know I appreciate it."

Better yet: Establish a system where once you have told Carly specifically what you would like each day, she knows there is a consequence for not complying - without your having to mention it repeatedly.

Dad to son:

"Brian, this is the third D you've gotten on a math quiz this quarter. If you put as much effort into math as you do on your Xbox games, I'm sure you would do much better."

Better: "Brian, I see that you have been trying hard to keep up with all the work in school this quarter. It's not easy, I know. I see that your grades in math are much lower than usual. Do you want any help from me or a tutor?"

Better yet: Have a policy for screen time, so that homework and studying come first. Only allow screen time for necessary breaks or as a reward for effort. Your child may lack self-discipline to moderate his usage, so you need to form an agreement and establish consequences. If he is still receiving D's, insist on providing him with help. You can make it a forced choice: "Do you want me to help you or for us to arrange for a tutor?"

Mom to Dad:

"John, why can't you be on time to take the kids to their practices? It's bad enough when you keep me waiting so much, but I hate it when the kids are late too."

Better: "John, it's nice that you're willing to take the kids to their practices on weekends, but

can you please be sure to get them there on time since it's really important to them?"

Better yet: If the children are old enough, have them ask their dad directly to please get them there on time.

Dad to Mom:

"Kelly, you left all the lights on in the house again before you left. It's such a waste and you don't seem to care about our utility bills."

Better: "Kelly, our electric bill was high last month. Please remember to turn off the lights when you go out."

Better yet: Invest in a remote system so you both can monitor the lights.

The "better yet" ideas are just in case they can work. If they won't, even framing messages differently can make a huge difference.

Second tip: Delay your response when necessary. Sometimes matters aren't as simple as the above examples and require more thought and discussion. When someone in your family is angry or frustrated with you, think about how you react. Do you immediately become defensive and argue back?

If, for example, your daughter tells you she is upset that you embarrassed her in front of her friends because of something you said, do you instantly take offense? Perhaps you took your daughter and her friends to a concert, and you went out of your way to be sure they got to attend and have a good time. You might then feel hurt or resentful to hear criticism after all of your good efforts.

As difficult as it may be, it is very helpful to put your immediate feelings aside. Delay your response. Ask your daughter what made her feel this way? Then show her that you understand her point of view. You don't need to agree with someone's point of view in order to show you understand it. Once your daughter confirms that you are accurate in your understanding, then you can begin the process of trying to resolve the issue together.

By being open to listening fully before responding, you can facilitate easier communication and good will within your family.

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