

HELPING A YOUNG PERSON COMMUNICATE

This document has been produced has been produced by Clyst Vale Community College's Counselling Service. This is not intended to be a definitive guide, but does hope to provide support to families communicating with a young person.

Lack of communication can cause a variety of problems for both a young person and their family. These problems can include anger issues, self-harm, eating disorders, anxiety, depression and confusion.

It is important to remember that skills an adult can take for granted are new, unknown or difficult for a young person. A classic problem for a young person is understanding an issue from someone else's point of view. Other difficulties include finding the right words to express new thoughts or feelings, and getting in touch with how they really feel.

There are many blocks to communication a young person may find difficult to overcome. This leaflet contains a few suggestions that may help.

THE RIGHT TIME, PLACE AND ACTIVITY

A young person may need to feel comfortable and safe in order to express difficult thoughts. Sometimes this is best done when there is privacy, especially from siblings.

Try to avoid choosing a busy time to have a discussion. Create a space to give quality attention to them. Sometimes a joint activity can help 'distract' a young person from feeling too awkward to chat. Washing dishes together, going for a walk, low-key shopping, car journeys, bike rides are all possible situations the young person may feel comfortable enough to talk.

BE REALISTIC

Expecting a young person to talk to you when they may be feeling vulnerable is not a good idea. You may need several attempts! Don't give up.

PERMISSION

Have a think about what kind of permission to talk your child has been given. Are there subjects you react to badly? Are there issues in the family that are not spoken about? Be certain yourself that you can comfortably discuss anything, then let your child know they can discuss anything with you whenever they want.

LISTENING

Once you have provided the right situation, you need to be prepared to listen to your child. Here are some simple guidelines that can help:

- Avoid interrupting
- Avoid being derogatory – remember what may be very simple or minor for you could be at the centre of the child's concern
- Be very careful how you use humour. It can seem innocent enough, but often humour is used to put people down and this can 'shut down' a young person's attempt to communicate
- Acknowledge your child's attempt to talk, even if it is unsuccessful, 'I can see this is very difficult for you...' might be a suitable statement.
- Give them plenty of space in the conversation to form their thoughts and express themselves; this may be where a joint activity can help to cover any long silences.
- Avoid registering shock, dismay, hurt, disapproval or anger.

Counsellors use a set of conditions to help people to talk, we call them the core conditions.

CORE CONDITIONS

Empathy – the ability to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. What is it like being the other person, what are they feeling, how are they dealing with their issue? How are things affecting them?

Empathy is a very powerful tool to help someone feel able to share. Often, empathy is described as warmth. Focus on understanding your child.

Empathy is a process, something that is done. It requires a lot of concentration and can be exhausting.

Congruence – otherwise known as being genuine, honest or real. People tend to feel safer talking to someone who is open and transparent. Congruence is a state of being and requires we believe in openness, rather than just faking it.

Unconditional Positive Regard - Often referred to as respect, and abbreviated to UPR. UPR is our ability to suspend any judgements of another person. This can be very difficult to do, as we tend to make judgements about others all the time. UPR is an attitude, of not being judgemental. Avoid using words like ‘should’ or ‘ought’. If we feel someone may judge us, we can tend to retreat into our shell, rather than take the risk of sharing.

LISTENING SKILLS

Counsellors use a variety of listening skills that are designed to show we are paying attention, that what the student is saying matters to us, and avoids us taking over a conversation, or guiding it to something we might want to talk about. Here are a few we use:

USING MINIMAL ENCOURAGERS

Counsellors use minimal encouragers, such as nodding of the head, saying ‘umm’ or ‘yes I see’, to show we are listening and to avoid taking over the conversation. It is a simple approach that lets the other person know you are still there and paying attention.

USING REFLECTION

Sometimes counsellors say some of the student’s words back to them. Said carefully, rather than like a parrot repeating something back, it can help the student feel you are paying attention, after all, you just said a key word they themselves used so you must be listening.

Reflection can be used to signal something very important has just been introduced into the chat. It can also slow a student down and help them avoid skipping over something that may be important.

USING SUMMARY

Summarising what a student has just spent 5 minutes saying is a powerful way to show that not only have you been listening, but you’ve been paying attention and have *understood*. Keep your summary to as few words as possible. You might want to use a phrase like ‘So you’re saying...[summary]’.

OTHER HELPFUL HINTS

Above all, be patient. Young people can struggle to find the right words to express something they have never said before. Let them know they can use the wrong words, say something inaccurately or badly, that nearly expresses what they feel. Then you can help them refine it, rather than the child struggle to forge something new and perfect every time.

Sometimes we really don’t know how we feel about something. It can take time to realise we are cross or angry.

People can feel more than one thing at a time, and may have several strong and even opposite feelings about the same thing. This can lead to confusion, but it is normal!