

Day in and day out, family members send messages to each other with their words, tone of voice, the expressions on their faces, gestures, and even with their whole bodies. These messages have to be received and understood. It sounds easy, but you probably know from your own experience that there are times when people don't communicate very well.

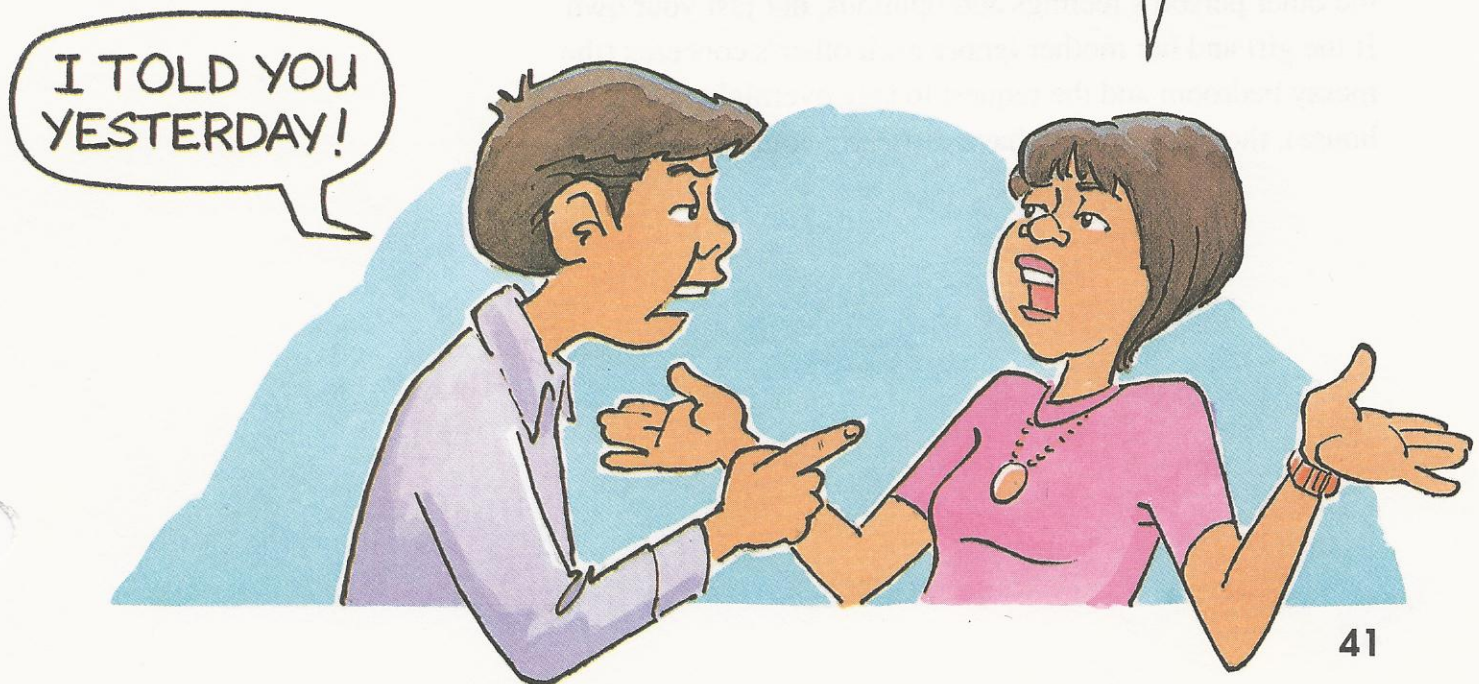
Good communication in the family is extremely important. Without it, we cannot share our thoughts and feelings or resolve the normal conflicts that are part of living in a family. When we communicate in a way that is honest, open, and respectful, we are nourishing our family relationships. When we never talk about the things that really matter to us, or are dishonest and disrespectful in the way we communicate, we are hurting these important relationships.

Some Communication Rules

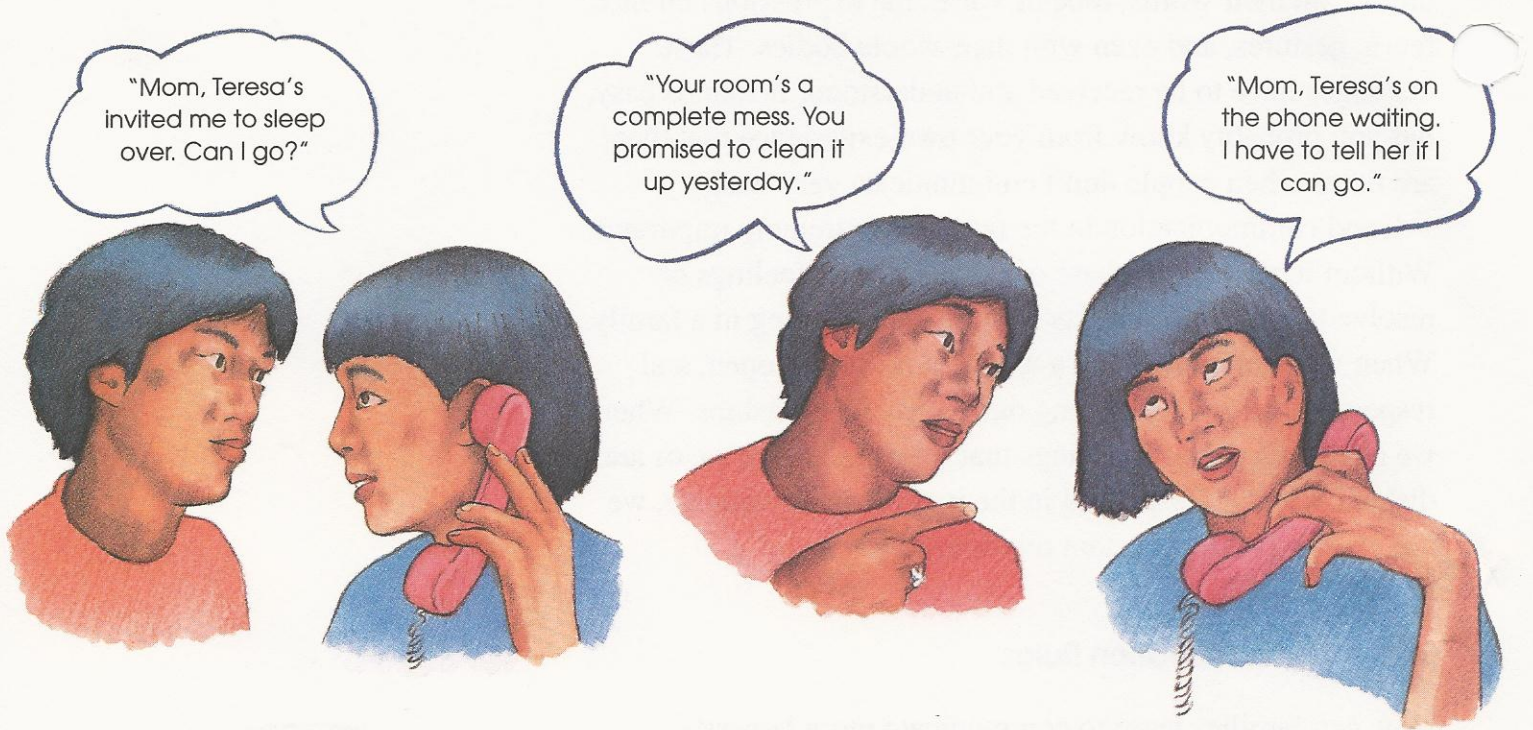
How can families learn to communicate more honestly and openly? First, they have to think about the way they communicate and decide whether there is room for improvement. Most people do see a need for at least some improvement. They want to be more honest and to avoid hurtful disagreements.

The first rule for good communication is:

- LISTEN WITH YOUR MIND AND HEART, NOT JUST YOUR EARS.



Are these people listening to each other?



This mother and daughter can hear each other, but they're not listening. If they really listened to each other their conversation might be different:

"Mom, Teresa's invited me to sleep over. Can I go?"

"This isn't the best time to ask me because I'm upset with you about your room. Could you let Teresa know a little later?"

"I'll tell Teresa I'll call her back."

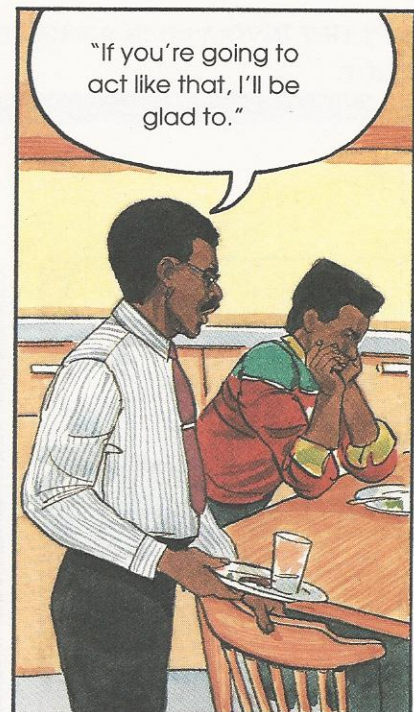
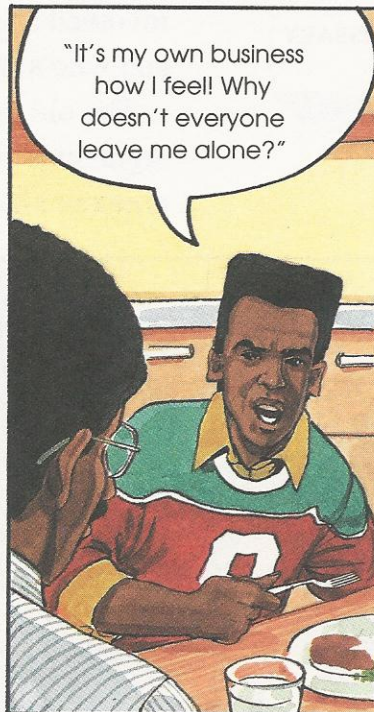
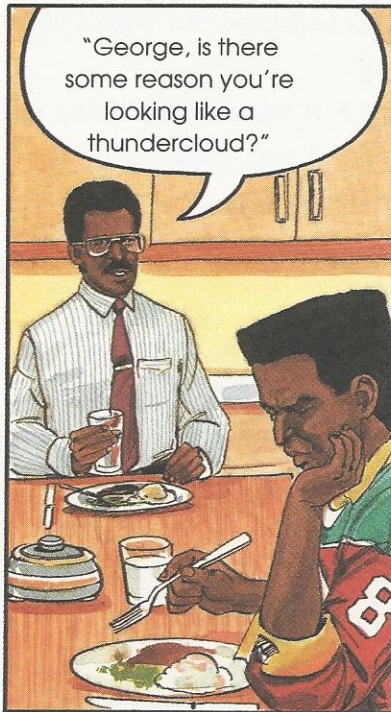
In order to listen, you have to make an effort to understand the other person's feelings and opinions, not just your own. If the girl and her mother ignore each other's concerns (the messy bedroom and the request to stay overnight at Teresa's house), they are going to have difficulty communicating.



A second important rule for good communication in the family is:

• SAY WHAT YOU MEAN IN A TACTFUL AND RESPECTFUL WAY.

What kind of communication difficulty are these people having?



George and his father are obviously doing something wrong. His dad cares about George's mood, but he doesn't express this concern in a clear or tactful way. George would like some privacy, but he communicates his need in a way that annoys and hurts his father. Then his father responds, but he doesn't say what he really means ("Hey, I feel hurt and angry when you push me away like that.")

Here's a more honest and tactful conversation between George and his father:

"Is there something bothering you? You look upset."

"I don't really want to talk about it right now, Dad."

"That's okay. But if I can help, let me know."

These first two rules for good family communication are simple to understand, but

are often hard to follow. Our tendency to be selfish is part of the problem. Also, the way in which we communicate becomes a habit, and habits are difficult to break. Learning new ways to communicate in the family takes motivation and real effort.

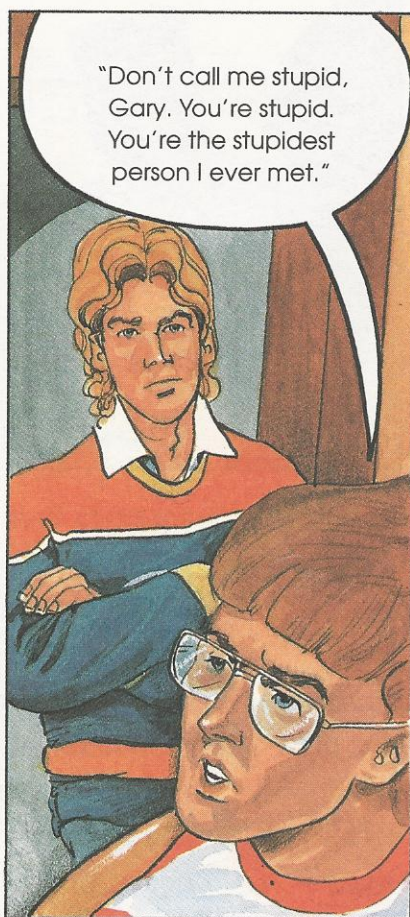
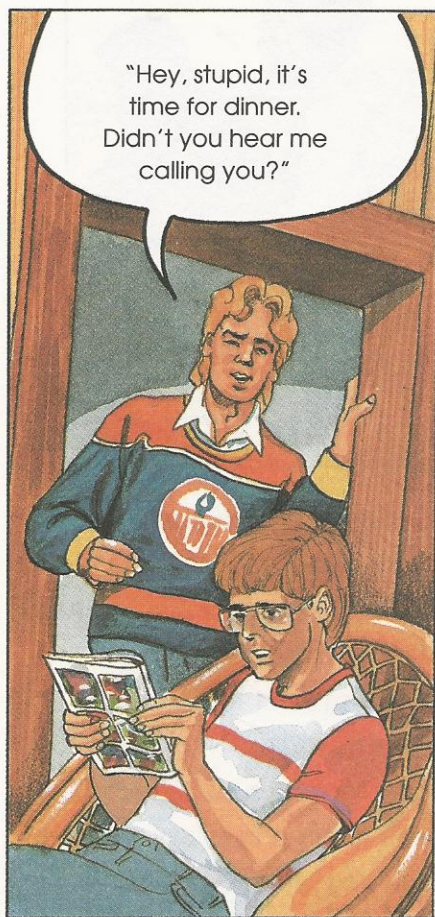
This is especially true when disagreements and conflicts, which happen in every family, occur. Conflicts can be resolved peacefully, or they can grow and turn into big arguments. In an argument, people express their feelings and opinions, but they are often more concerned with winning than with the other person's feelings and opinions. Most family arguments break the rules for good communication. People don't listen to each other, they don't always say what they mean, and what they say is rarely tactful.

The two communication rules you have already discussed are important in situations of conflict. But here is a third rule that can be helpful, particularly for brothers and sisters.

• DON'T GET INVOLVED IN AN UNNECESSARY CONFLICT.

You probably know from your own experience that some arguments get started for the silliest reasons. A sister teases a brother, and before you know it, they are having a noisy fight. Then their mother or father gets involved and tries to figure out who's right and who's wrong.

The old saying, "It takes two to have an argument," is a good one. How could this argument have been avoided?



Gary sent his brother, John, an invitation to have a fight and John accepted it. He had other choices. He could have ignored Gary's remark completely. Or he could have said, "I really don't like it when you call me stupid, and no, I didn't hear you call me for dinner." Gary might have responded with another insult ("I call you stupid because that's what you are"),

but John would still have a choice about getting into a full-scale battle. Teasing and insults are invitations to an argument or fight and do not have to be accepted.

Earlier we talked about the family as a social environment and its deep influence on each person. Disagreements among family members are a normal part of living in a family.

At times, however, these small conflicts may turn into larger ones. The family environment can become stressful and unhappy. Each person needs to stop and think:



Each family member shares in the responsibility of creating a family environment that is peaceful, open, honest, tactful, and respectful.

Special Issues in Family Living

We have already discussed one issue in family living — communication. As children grow up, there are changes that occur in the family that raise new issues. An issue in family living is anything that is important to family members, and that has an effect on their relationship. An issue is not necessarily a problem, but it is often something that could turn into a problem.

The changes that occur in families as children grow up can be stressful for everyone. Both parents and children have to learn new ways of relating to each other. Some families find this very difficult and certain issues may develop into big problems. Understanding what is happening is helpful, but some stress is unavoidable.

