



FLY FiVE[®]

The Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION



Improving Communication

Take a moment to consider how you communicate with others. How do you express yourself when you're feeling overwhelmed by gratitude? What about during a moment of intense conflict? In a faculty meeting, are you the first to speak up or the one who takes notes, reflects, and then sends follow-up emails? We all have a uniquely personal way of communicating our thoughts, ideas, and emotions.

Our communication style has been honed over years of socializing in school and work, in families and friend groups, among colleagues and strangers. Our students are still in the process of learning how to communicate. As they learn to navigate family dynamics and social relationships in school and extracurriculars, they are consciously and unconsciously forming communication habits that may stay with them for life. As educators, it's our job to ensure students are thinking critically about how they communicate and building healthy, constructive communication strategies.

The Impact of Good Communication

Individuals who are strong communicators and listeners are better able to influence others and glean a clear understanding of the person with whom they are interacting; people who listen well tend to be liked better and are more trusted than those who don't (Costigan & Brink, 2019). Increased communication skills in students can improve their engagement and enthusiasm in the classroom (Diloyan, 2019), which in turn leads to deeper learning and more positive outcomes. Strong oral communication skills, which involve presenting, listening, and conversing, have been shown to be a predictor of one's ability to exert influence and build rapport with others, which is a critical competency for leadership in the classroom and the workplace (Costigan & Brink, 2019). Improving a student's ability to communicate can have long-lasting effects for their academic, social, and emotional success.



How Do We Communicate?



The way that we communicate, and are expected to communicate, is context specific. What constitutes proper communication in a library, for instance, is much different than what constitutes good communication during a playground conflict. Consider the different ways we express our thoughts and signal how we are feeling: physically, linguistically, cognitively, and socially and emotionally.

- **Physical communication** encompasses the nonverbal messages we send with our facial expressions and body language.
- **Linguistic communication** involves the way we speak, including our word choices and tone of voice.
- **Cognitive communication** refers to our ability to reiterate others' ideas, build upon them, and challenge them with our own.
- And **social and emotional communication** indicates how well we listen, include others in our thinking, and the way in which we respond to others (Stott, 2018).



Explore with students what each of these types of communication means to them. Have they had an experience where their body language conveyed a different message than they intended? How do they feel when someone shows them good social and emotional communication, listening to what they are saying and offering them respect and interest? After students have reflected upon the many different ways we can communicate, guide them to think more critically about context-specific location.

Highlight the difference between the library and the playground, but encourage them to generate a list of situations, both physical locations and interpersonal situations, with differing communication expectations. How can someone communicate a hurt feeling to a friend? What would communication look like while a family member is on a work call in the same room?



When students explore these different means of communication in a variety of contexts, they will dive deeper into their own habits and tendencies. They'll learn to assess the messages they are sending and how they may be interpreted, which allows students to build upon the communication strengths they already possess.

Strategies for Improving Communication

While some students may seem to possess a natural ability to communicate, we must strive to ensure that all students are explicitly taught the skills to communicate effectively. One aspect of teaching students to communicate well involves understanding communication's barriers.

One major hurdle in proper communication is fear. Someone may fear failing, for example during a presentation or debate or they may fear rejection if they speak their mind. Communicating clearly and directly involves as much confidence as it does competence (Grace & Gilsdorf, 2004).

Another obstacle that stands in the way of effective communication is the human tendency to evaluate what someone else says before actually engaging with the content of their words. This "evaluative tendency" refers to the moment when we judge, evaluate, approve, or disapprove of someone else's statement (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991). For example, if someone says "I didn't like that movie," our initial response is likely "Oh but I did!" or "I didn't like it either." The impulse to evaluate is even stronger in situations where emotions are heightened; the stronger emotions one is experiencing, the more difficult it will be to settle on a mutual thread of communication (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991).



Cultural differences or unclear expectations can also serve as a barrier to adequate communication. Understanding the cultural diversity in students is essential to use specific communication tactics and strategies that align with a student's norms and expectations. Fostering a culturally specific style of communication in the classroom can increase student engagement and enthusiasm for learning (Diloyan, 2019). Power dynamics, whether between teachers and students or students and students, also play a role in the effectiveness of communication. Regardless of the nature of the relationship among individuals, all parties must feel willing to express their thoughts in an environment where differences will be tolerated and ideas will be respected (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991).

In order to overcome these barriers and facilitate meaningful communication in your classroom, try implementing the following strategies:

- **Outline a list of things students can think about while they communicate.**

Physical check marks, like making eye contact and remembering to take a breath before responding (Grace & Gilsdorf, 2004) can help students remain grounded and in the moment. Highlighting clear, concrete steps when students are sitting up straight, making eye contact, and listening, they are already set up for a productive conversation.



- **Praise listening as well as speaking.**

Not every student will be an outspoken orator, even when given the tools to do so. Be sure to praise students who listen well and highlight how being an active listener is an essential component of being a strong communicator. Encourage activities that involve observation and reflection, and facilitate partner work or writing/creative assignments to play to the strengths of less outspoken students.



- **Implement classroom activities that require ample interaction among classmates.** Interactive activities require good listening, thinking through problems, and articulating solutions in real time (Costigan & Brink, 2019).
 - Try having students draw with their eyes closed while another student verbally guides their pencil or play a game of telephone or charades. Such activities highlight both the importance and difficulty of communicating clearly in a fun, tangible way.
 - Present a current event or new instructional concept and have students discuss their thoughts and ideas in small groups. Each student will articulate the position of another group member to the class.
- **Incorporate exercises that require public speaking and presenting** (Grace & Gilsdorf, 2004).
 - Give students some think-time to respond to the question “who am I?” and then present their answer to a small group or the whole class.
 - Present a three to five minute summary about class material or a literary resource. Whether it is an in-class concept or a book or article they’ve engaged with outside of class, show students how to prepare, organize, and present their learning.

- **Teach students how to use “I” statements to foster assertive communication** (Alvernia, 2018). “I” statements ensure that students take ownership of their own feelings and communicate themselves in a way that minimizes defensiveness from the other party. If a friend is hurting another friend’s feelings, instead of saying, “You keep saying mean things to me,” show students how to shift their language to say, “I feel sad when you speak to me that way.” This teaches students to explore what’s really bothering them and express themselves in a healthy way.
- **Utilize leaderless group discussions** (Costigan & Brink, 2019). Leaderless group discussions require active listening and collaborative problem solving. After the leaderless group activity, have students reflect on what went well and where they think they can improve their communication skills in the future.
- **Practice restating what another person is saying** (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991). For younger students, they can work with partners to practice the process of pausing before stating their own point of view and repeating what their partner said. For older students, consider having groups research topics they care about and present the information to a partner or small group.



Whether a student is extroverted or introverted, they can be given the tools to become excellent communicators. Opportunities for improving communication abound in the classroom, the cafeteria, on Zoom, and at the dinner table. Show students you are interested in what they have to say, model open-ended questions, and display high expectations for their communication abilities. When we support students in their endeavor to express themselves clearly, listen actively, and understand others, we are setting them up to build strong, lasting relationships for life.



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