



Workshop Description: This workshop supports youth program staff in developing and practicing effective communication skills in youth programs. Successful implementation of this workshop will ultimately help youth program staff to reflect on how they support youth's communication skills and how they use communication to further support the positive development of youth within the program.

This workshop guide will ask participants to examine and reflect on their communication strategies to better assist youth in their development. This workshop guide and all others within the Effective Communication series are intended to build skills in youth program staff that help address maladaptive behavior and better assist youth in their development.

Preparation Time: The preparation time for this workshop is approximately 15 to 20 minutes. This preparation time should include reading background information on the Effective Communication and Positive Youth Development website and in this workshop guide, collecting materials, and gathering any additional information you may need.

Instruction Time: It will take approximately 2 hours to complete all activities within this guide. If you do not have time for the full workshop, use only the most relevant activities to make the workshop fit within your timeframe, or split the workshop into multiple sessions. Be sure to keep the reflection portion of the activities and workshop as this is where staff should consider how the activities and knowledge apply to their work.

Materials:

- Writing utensils for each participant
- White printer paper
- List of abstract nouns (one per participant)
- Incentives/rewards (e.g., candy)
- Flip chart paper or a whiteboard

Preparation Instructions: You should read the content related to this topic on the Effective Communication and Positive Youth Development website, specifically the content related to Understanding Effective Communication. In addition, you should review the background information in this workshop guide, gather all necessary materials, and prepare for the activities.

In this series of workshops, youth program staff will learn skills in a specific sequence. We recommend you complete this set of workshops in the following order:

1. *Understanding Effective Communication*
2. *Effective Communication and Youth Development Factors*
3. *Effective Communication Strategy: Active Listening*
4. *Effective Communication Strategy: Clear Expectations and Direction*
5. *Understanding Stages of Change and Motivational Interviewing*
6. *Understanding Change Talk*
7. *Motivational Interviewing Strategies*
8. *Practicing Motivational Interviewing*



Knowledge: Understanding Effective Communication

Communication is a big part of our days. We talk to friends, coworkers, and family members to let them know our plans, progress on tasks, and to make requests. We make notes, leave notes, send emails, and read signs. We may even think communication is simple—an exchange of ideas and thoughts done verbally, or in writing, with two or more people involved in sending and receiving information. Effective communication, however, is more complicated than this definition. Transmitting and receiving thoughts and ideas effectively takes skill and practice.

Effective communication assumes that ideas and thoughts are not only *shared* but *understood* AND that ideas and information *generate meaning* and help to *influence decisions, thoughts, and feelings*.^{14, 15, 16, 17}

Being an effective communicator is much more than choosing the right words to say or write. It involves understanding and using social cues (e.g., being aware of events, incidents, the general context in which the communication occurs, relationships between receivers, etc.), reading body language (e.g., eye contact, proximity, posture, and facial expressions), and interpreting these social cues, body language, and other signs.²⁰

To be effective communicators, youth program staff must learn specific communication strategies while maintaining awareness of the many environments in which youth and their families work, live, and play. To do this, staff establish positive adult-youth relationships and support the integration of activities across youth's families, schools, and communities.

Theories

There are many theories around interpersonal communication, and generally they can be categorized into three different groups: individually centered, interaction centered, and relationship centered. Individually centered theories focus on the individuals' planning, production, and processing of messages. Interaction centered theories focus on the content, forms, functions, behavioral exchanges, and meanings of messages. Relationship centered theories are based on the study of how interpersonal communication impacts relationships.^{31, 32} Supportive relationships are one of the essential elements of positive youth development programs,⁶ so relationship centered theories for communication work nicely toward helping give program staff a grounding in effective communication.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory suggests that individuals, especially children, are preprogrammed to form attachments, or deep enduring emotional bonds, as part of their normal growth and development. Children first learn to develop attachments through communication with their caregiver, and the bonds formed in infancy can be early building blocks for relationships throughout an individual's life.^{34, 35, 36}

Both verbal and nonverbal communication can have an impact on attachment and relationships by either being a cause for a type of attachment or representing the nature of an attachment. For example, parents who communicate anxiety-based messages may contribute to their children's fearful attachment, and parents with dismissive attachment styles likely use avoidant or passive communication.³³ Securely attached individuals tend to communicate in ways that promote healthy relationship development while those with insecure attachments may withdraw and exhibit more aggressive and unhealthy communication styles that increase conflict.^{39, 40} Even our choice of mode of communication (telephone calls, email, text messages) may be associated with our level of attachment to the recipient of the communication. Recent research indicates that within more attached relationships, more intimate (e.g., telephone calls) modes of communication may be used, and less



attached relationships use more detached (e.g., email) modes of communication.⁴¹ Youth who demonstrate aggressive or avoidant communication styles with youth program staff may need more opportunities to learn healthier communication strategies. In addition, staff who have firm and warm communication styles may help to foster positive attachments and relationships with those youth who exhibit negative communication behaviors.

Key Take Away: What youth learn regarding attachment in early childhood can have an impact on how they communicate. Positive or securely attached youth likely have positive or healthy communication skills. These early attachment lessons may impact verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

Relational Communication Theory

Scientists suggest that the link between the individual and their environments influences human development and growth and is bidirectional, meaning the individual influences their environments and environments influence the individual. This way of learning is often grouped in a set of theories called relational-developmental theories,⁴⁵ which emphasize the link between individuals and the environments in which they live, work, and play.⁴⁶

In addition, our ability to communicate effectively is believed to be greatly influenced by social interactions (or relationships) within our environment. Consequently, youth can learn interpersonal communication skills by watching their peers and youth program staff (modeling), from a teacher (instruction), by practicing in an environment (rehearsal), and when peers and staff encourage and support positive communication strategies (reinforcement).⁴⁴

Relational communication theory falls within the relational-developmental theories family and suggests that communication helps to develop the relationship between individuals. It also suggests that systems of relationships, such as between families and a youth program, come into being through complex patterns of communication.⁴⁷

A main focus of the relational communication theory is how the message, the way the message is received, and even the interaction of receiving the message impacts the meaning of the communication. Another component of this theory is the idea that messages have two levels of meaning: *content* meaning (what the message is about) and *relational* meaning (how the message is interpreted).⁴⁹

Nonverbal communication (body language, tone, and intensity) is the way that the relational meaning of messages is most often communicated.⁵⁰ For youth program staff, understanding both the content and relational meanings is important for building supportive relationships with youth and understanding the impact their communication may have on youth.

Key Takeaway: Effective communication is more than simply sending and receiving a message. It includes interactions between youth and their environment, interactions between the sender and receiver, and important cues like body language that impact how the message is interpreted. Relational communication theory proposes that communication helps to develop the relationships between communicators and that the communicators' environments likely influence their communication.

Objectives:

- Develop youth program staff understanding of effective communication
- Examine effective communication strategies and explore how youth program staff develop those strategies



- Develop youth program staff understanding of how their use of receptive and active communication skills can impact youth

Introduction (5 minutes):

- Describe effective communication and how it contributes to the success of the program.
 - What to say: “Today we are going to talk about how an understanding of effective communication can be used to improve program quality. Most people define effective communication as creating shared meanings and accomplishing goals together through verbal and nonverbal communication.”
- Transition into Prior Knowledge activity:
 - What to say: “To start, we are going to gauge how familiar you are with the concept of effective communication.”

Prior Knowledge (5-7 minutes):

- Ask the participants if they have anything to add to the definition of effective communication you have given (i.e., creating shared meanings). You may need to assist with these definitions using the background information provided to jumpstart the conversation. Record responses where participants can see.
- Ask the participants if there is anything they are unsure of in regards to effective communication or if there is anything they want to learn through this workshop. Again, record responses.

Activities:

Activity: *Introduction to Effective Communication* (15 minutes)

- Describe the *Introduction to Effective Communication* activity:
 - What to say: “Today we’ll be examining effective communication strategies. Effective communication skills can be broken up into two types: those used to receive a message and those used to deliver a message. Let’s work together to come up with techniques that would fall into those two categories from the speaker’s point of view.”
- Lead the *Introduction to Effective Communication* activity:
 - On a flip chart or whiteboard, make two lists: one titled “Receptive Skills” and the other titled “Expressive Skills”.
 - Once you have titled the lists, say, “Receptive skills refer to the ability to infer meaning from one’s surroundings in order to set the stage for effective communication; for example, if you see a young person with wet cheeks, you might think they were crying or sad. If instead their forehead was wet, you might think they are warm from exercising or that it is hot outside. There are many cues around us that can help us understand what’s going on. Expressive skills, on the other hand, refer to the ability to effectively communicate thoughts and feelings via spoken, written, signed, or body language. Examples of expressive strategies include asking questions, clarifying and summarizing, etc.”
 - Ask the participants to come up with examples of receptive and expressive skills.
 - Instructor Note: If participants are stuck on receptive strategies, encourage them to think about how our five senses can offer clues about our surroundings.



For expressive strategies, encourage them to consider examples of written and nonverbal communication (e.g., being clear and succinct, hand gestures, feet pointing towards the person they're talking to, etc.).

- Write the lists under their respective titles.
- After the lists are complete, lead a short discussion of how practicing receptive and expressive skills can improve communication.

Activity: Paper Folding (15 minutes)

- Describe the *Paper Folding* activity:
 - What to say: "This activity will help you recognize how complex communication is and that effective communication is key to getting a point across. Since we all have different minds, each person may vary in their understanding of the same set of instructions."
- Lead the *Paper Folding* activity:
 - Hand out a sheet of paper for everyone, and ask the participants to close their eyes.
 - Instruct the participants to keep their eyes closed and follow your paper folding instructions.
 - Give the group 7 to 10 instructive statements. Use the following list as examples of possible directions. Change in order and repeat statements are OK.
 - Fold the paper in half
 - Fold the paper the long way (hot dog)
 - Fold the paper the short way (hamburger)
 - Fold the lower left corner over the upper right corner
 - Fold the paper into a diamond shape
 - Fold the paper into a square
 - Fold to meet the center line
 - Turn over
 - Rip a half circle in the middle of the right side
 - Once you've given an extensive list of instructions, ask the participants to open their eyes and look at their paper.
 - Ask the participants to compare their paper to their neighbors' and note the differences in how they look.
 - Discuss the discrepancies between each paper, and draw attention to the problem of one-sided communication and how different perspectives lead to different results.

Activity: Active Listening Gone Wrong (25-30 minutes)

- Describe the *Active Listening Gone Wrong* activity:
 - What to say: "Active listening is a powerful effective communication strategy. In this activity, we will role play staff-youth interactions that demonstrate the consequences of a lack of active listening. It's important to be mindful of the ways you respond to youth verbally and nonverbally as they significantly impact the quality of the conversation and, in turn, your relationship with youth."
- Lead the *Active Listening Gone Wrong* activity:
 - Select two volunteers: one to play the part of youth and the other to play the part of staff. Ask the youth to think of a concern they would like to bring up to the staff. Meanwhile, provide the staff volunteer with a note card with examples of poor listening

skills: avoid eye contact, check your phone, interrupt the speaker, show inappropriate facial expressions, offer advice, lecture or preach to the youth, etc. Essentially, ask the staff volunteer not to listen to or care about the youth.

- Before starting the role play, divide the participants in half. Instruct one half of the participants to observe what the staff does wrong and the other half to observe how the youth responds to these poor listening skills verbally and nonverbally.
- Set a timer for 5 minutes and begin the role play.
- When the time is up, provide each group with a sheet of paper and a writing utensil. Have the participants briefly discuss among their groups and write down their observations on the sheet of paper.
 - While the participants discuss, write the categories “youth” and “staff” in a place where all participants can see to record their observations.
- Then, have one person from each group share their answers with everyone. After each group shares, ask the volunteer in the role play to also share their thoughts and feelings as they played their role. Discuss any discrepancies between the group’s thoughts and the volunteer’s.

Activity: *Clear Expectations and Directions Gone Wrong* (25 minutes)

- Before leading the *Clear Expectations and Directions Gone Wrong* activity, read through the activity and write down as many abstract nouns as there are participants on small pieces of paper. Abstract nouns are things that cannot be seen or touched but can be felt. Keep a list of the nouns so participants can refer to the list when guessing. Keep in mind that the nouns should be simple to draw—avoid emotions or feelings. Prepare a bag of candy or other small incentives.
- Describe the *Clear Expectations and Directions Gone Wrong* activity:
 - What to say: “We are going to do some drawing that will demonstrate the importance of clear expectations and directions. The goal of this activity is to help you practice stating the intended outcome and using succinct language to avoid misunderstandings and mistakes.”
- Lead the *Clear Expectations Directions Gone Wrong* activity:
 - First, divide the participants into teams of three. Then, assign each teammate a role: One should be the leader, one an artist, and the last a note-taker. Provide each group with two sheets of blank paper and a pen.
 - Ask the leaders to select a slip of paper with a word written on it that you prepared beforehand.
 - What to say: “We are going to have a competition between groups. First, each leader will use the pen and a sheet of paper to draw out the concept you just selected. You cannot include any letters, words, or numbers in the drawing, and the drawing needs to have more than one object. Second, the leader will give instructions to the artist to copy the drawing exactly without showing the artist the paper. The note-taker should document how people behave during the activity, what seems to be working, and where the participants can do better. Afterward, everyone should try to guess the concept by looking at the artist’s drawing. You can earn points in two ways. You will earn 1 point if everyone can guess your word and earn up to 5 points depending on my rating of how similar the two drawings are.”



Effective Communication Workshop Guide

Understanding Effective Communication

- Allow the leaders to draw for 5 minutes.
 - Instructor Note: For the first round, walk around the room to make sure the leaders are following the rules.
- When the time is up, move on to instructing the artist to draw out the leader's interpretation of the abstract concept.
- Come back to the larger group and guess the word.
 - Instructor Note: Remind everyone to have integrity and try their best to guess the word.
- If time allows, switch roles so each member of the team can practice being the leader.
 - Instructor Note: Use the drawing time to compare the artworks from each team and tally up the points.
- Ask each team to discuss amongst themselves what they observed while acting as the note-taker each round; then, share these observations with the large group. Draw attention to what was important about understanding the leader's expectations for the drawing and getting clear instructions. Focus the discussion on how everyone hears instructions differently. Also, discuss how participants can use what they've learned with youth in the program.
- Finally, reward the winning team.

Activity: *Impact of Effective Communication* (25 minutes)

- Describe the *Impact of Effective Communication* activity:
 - What to say: "Previously, we witnessed what it looks like when active listening was not used correctly. Now we'll do another role play and see what the outcome will be if you do use active listening correctly. The goal of this activity is to develop your understanding of how to use receptive and expressive communication skills and how those skills can impact youth."
- Lead the *Impact of Effective Communication* activity:
 - Select two volunteers from the participants: one to play the part of "youth" and the other to play the part of "staff" in the role play.
 - Ask the youth to think of a concern they would like to bring up to the staff.
 - Ask the group how the staff should behave in order to communicate effectively. Responses may include listening attentively, facing the youth and maintaining eye contact, seeking to understand rather than lecture or offer advice to the youth, etc. Ask the staff to use these strategies to communicate effectively.
 - Divide the remaining participants into two groups.
 - Instruct one group to take notes on the youth's responses and the second to take notes on how well the staff uses receptive and expressive communication skills.
 - Begin the role play, and let it run for 3 to 5 minutes.
 - Lead a discussion on what the two groups noticed. Ask youth program staff to think about long-term positive outcomes when they use active listening effectively.
 - Instructor Note: If the group cannot think of long-term positive outcomes, suggest youth may feel they are supported by staff who demonstrate expressive and receptive communication skills. Feeling supported may lead to better



mental health, and youth may demonstrate more healthy or prosocial behaviors. In addition, youth may demonstrate fewer unhealthy or at-risk behaviors because they received the attention they needed. By practicing effective communication, youth will see you modeling healthy communication, one of the ways youth learn new skills. This work will support positive attachment and relationships, leading to better communication between you and youth and between youth.

Reflection and Recap (5 minutes):

- Return to the participants' responses gathered at the start of the workshop (see Prior Knowledge activity). Ask the participants what they learned during the course of the workshop, and record the information. Draw attention to topics that were on the list generated earlier, new topics, and questions that were answered.
- Ask follow-up questions, such as "What part of the activity made you realize that?" and "How could you use these strategies with youth?"

Resources:

None

Sources:

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