

R. V. Peavy  
University of Victoria  
March, 1972

### Effective Family Relationships

There is little doubt that maintaining effective family relationships is becoming more difficult all of the time. This is true for both husband and wife and parent and child. We are familiar with rising divorce rates, rising delinquency rates, high incidence of suicide, wide-spread child abuse, alcoholism and countless varieties of family stress and strain. In times of clear-headedness, most of us admit that we are not completely effective in relating to each other. Perhaps we can also see that when we are in the middle of a mess, we usually feel that it is we who know best and act most wisely and it is the other guy who is wrong, stupid and impossible.

Most people have good intentions. We might as well face the fact that good intentions are not enough. In truth we may even use our good intentions to excuse poor performance. Unless an intention is carried out in our actions, then we can place little confidence in "good intentions." Thus we should judge a person not by what he intends to do, but by his ability to turn his intention into a fact. To me, this suggests that the main job for any adult--parent, teacher, spouse--who would like to enjoy more rewarding relationships is: to learn the skills he needs in order to be effective. The effective person is a clear, congruent communicator and is skilled in creating and maintaining workable relationships.

Whether or not we get on with the people around us depends directly upon the type of relationships we have with them. Relationships are made up of our words and our actions. To put this another way, how we talk and act toward another person determines what kind of relationship we have with him. Of course, the same is true for the other person. It takes two to relate.

What is effective relating anyway? A lot of research has gone into trying to provide an answer for this question. Briefly, we can put our finger on some, if not all, of the qualities which an effective person has:

1. he is attentive to you, he pays close attention to what you are talking about,
2. he uses your own language--he does not "talk down" or use strange, complicated or technical words--he does not talk like he is better than you, or "knows best,"
3. he is warm and natural--he seems personally friendly and does not "put on a face" or act affected toward you,
4. he listens with concern and does not let his own judgments interfere with what you are saying,
5. he says what he is thinking about a situation--he makes sense and does not confuse you or lead you astray,
6. he rarely provokes strong anger and resentment.

Perhaps the central quality of the effective person is that he sticks to the actual situation rather than slipping into past examples or future predictions. He listens to your ideas and feelings and tries to see exactly what you are talking about. In doing this he doesn't "pull rank," he doesn't demand that you respect him, nor does he give you any "quick advice." An effective communicator doesn't give "advice" for he has discovered that it is almost never followed; furthermore, when followed, it frequently leads in the wrong direction. Worst of all, the obvious result of most advice-giving is that it stops communication.

A really effective person is able to a) understand another person and b) take action in relation to another person. An effective parent, then, is one who truly understands his child (and the child's situation), and is able to respond or take action toward the child which makes sense and which the child will accept. Let us look at both of these a little more closely. With regard to understanding his child, the effective parent has learned how to

see things the way the child sees them and has learned how to let the child know that he sees them that way. Most parents do not know how to use empathy (see the world through their child's eyes). This is a skill that can be learned.

Secondly, an effective parent actually cares for his child. Caring for someone does not mean knowing what is best for them. Caring for someone does not mean "taking care" of them. Most of all caring is not "telling" the other person something. Caring means: letting the other person know that you believe in his ability to do something about the difficulties he faces in his life. Caring is acting toward him so that he gets the message that you believe in him, value him, and have the courage to let him find out how to do things for himself. Almost without exception, the parent who is determined that his child do exactly what he "tells" him to do is a parent who has not yet learned to care.

Thirdly, an effective parent has learned how to help his child be specific about his feelings, thoughts and experiences. Few adults have learned to be specific about their own thoughts. Adults tend to be experts in "beating around the bush," refusing to talk about certain very important matters like sex, our belief in God, drugs, how much money the parents make and why they spend it the way they do, how come dad drinks so much, why mother always insists on proper table manners, and so on. We adults are super in generalizing or resorting to "because I said so" tactics and are real flunk-outs when it comes to specifically talking about and listening to exactly what kids want to talk about.

Basic understanding skills, then, are empathy, caring and being specific. Each of these skills can be learned by adults. Once they are learned, they form the basis for effective action.

What about effective action? What I am going to say now will not be pleasant--perhaps there is something to that old saying that the truth often hurts. First, effective actions are genuine and free from hypocrisy. Put bluntly, this means taking steps to stop being a phony. There is probably no adult action more corrosive than phoniness--saying one thing and doing something else. Some examples are preaching the evils of smoke or drink and then drinking and smoking oneself. To excuse one's own actions on the basis that as an adult I can do this and as a child you can't is the rankest form of hypocrisy. Advising honesty and then going through fancy footwork with income tax returns is another example. Preaching thrift and sinking \$4000.00 into a new automobile is yet another example of unguineness. Screaming about drugs and then beating a hot path to the aspirin, tranquillizers, alcohol, is a current form of widespread phoniness. By this don't read that I favor drug-taking. Rather, read that I favor real (genuine) actions.

Second, effective action is letting the other person know exactly what you hear him saying and what message his actions convey to you. Only by careful listening can you tell the other person what you hear from him. I'm not talking here of your "interpretation" of what he is saying but of what you actually hear. When a son says, "My girlfriend is going away for the summer, I sure hope she writes" the ineffective parent says "Thank god, that's one problem out of the way,"; the effective parent lets the boy know that he has heard by saying, "I guess that you will really miss her."

Third, the responsible parent is aware of the feelings which he has for his child, and the child for him, in the immediate situation.

Finally, the most important skill of all--for both understanding and responding is careful, patient listening. He who listens, heals. To be

Carefully listened to, and not judged for what one is saying, is one of the most health-giving and powerful experiences a person can have. It does not matter so much whether one remembers what he hears forever. What really matters is that listening is total, unbroken and non-judgmental. Listening in its most developed form is almost a devotion. Very few people have an opportunity to learn how to be deep listeners. Schools have not discovered the power of listening--they teach remembering. Virtually all forms of effective personal communication rest on true listening. The parent who listens learns continuously from his children. Today children are our best teachers. A man and woman who have discovered how to deeply listen to each other can hardly escape being bound together in profound love. A great teacher is a listener--he listens to himself (few people really do listen to themselves, you know, they just rattle on), he listens to his pupils, and he listens to silence which is the birthplace of creativity. Listening is a skill which can be increased to some extent by every individual, and to a great extent by many.

The four effective responses then are: being genuine, telling the other just what messages you are getting from him, working with the immediate situation and listening. Adding these all up we get seven specific skills which an adult can learn and will help him be more effective in family communication. Incidentally, I have been speaking mostly about parent and child. What I have said applies equally to parent and parent, teacher and child, teacher and parent, even child and child. Again, the seven basic skills are:

1. ability to use empathy,
2. ability to care,
3. ability to be specific,
4. ability to be genuine,
5. speaking directly and saying accurately what you hear,
6. ability to respond to the immediate situation, and
7. ability to listen without judging.

As nearly as I can tell, the core skill upon which the others depend is careful, deep listening with suspended judgment.

Now I will set out examples of empathy, caring, and being specific along with some ineffective examples. As you read them try not to "judge" what I have written. Instead, try to understand what I am saying. This will make your reading a small experiment in communication.

Empathy. (the ability to see as another sees)

Child: I don't want to go to the dentist, it will hurt!

Empathetic response: It is kind of scary, thinking about going to the dentist.

Non-effective response: Don't be a baby--you're going all right.

Non-effective response: Look at me, I don't cry when I go to the dentist.

Caring. (letting the other know you believe in him and are with him.)

Teen-ager: I'm about finished with school at the end of this year. I just don't know for sure what I want to do and even if school is doing me any good. I've been thinking about going back east this summer with John.

Caring response: I can really understand how hard it is to know what is the best thing to do. You know that its important to us that you find a place in life that's okay for you. School may not be the answer --if there's something I can do to help, I will.

Non-effective response: What, stop going to school? Not over my dead body! You've got to have a good job and the only way to do that is to go on to University.

Non-effective response: We've always wanted you to finish school--we've worked and saved so that you could have the things we didn't have when we were your age. How can you talk of not going on to school?

Being Specific (Paying specific attention to the other person's talk and actions--this helps him to continue talking).

Teen-age daughter: Mom, I want to go on the pill.

Specific response: You sound like you've made up your mind. I'd like to hear more from you--I have a good booklet on the pill which Dr. J. gave me when I started. I'll get it for you.

Non-effective response: What! I suppose you are on your way to being one of those kind. Don't you let me hear you say anything about those awful pills again--your father would have a heart attack if he heard you talking about this.

Non-effective response: Oh, dear me. Reverend S. asked me the other day why you don't come to young peoples meeting any more.

Most of us have learned to use our authority (power) as a way of relating. We have not had much experience with people who have learned other forms of relating. Power, of course, does work--for the moment. Power relationships have decided limitations. To use power invites defiance and rebellion. Most teen-agers are not rebelling against their parents as much as they are rebelling against power. Power hurts. Power also runs out. Power only works as long as the parent is stronger than his child--this is a condition which in most cases comes to an end. Authority or power relationships are not based on understanding and skill as much as upon force, fear and guilt. Also, the parent, teacher, or spouse who operates from a power (authority) base must spend a lot of his energy just controlling and making sure that the necessary conditions prevail so that he can stay in power.

I will list those results of power that seem to me to be undesirable. These of course, are not the only results and do not result from every show of power; yet they do stem from the use of authority in human relationships in a great many cases:

1. defiance, resistance to authority
2. resentment, anger, hostility
3. getting-even, vengeance
4. cheating, blaming, tattling
5. lying, hiding true feelings and thoughts
6. bullying, needing to be first
7. needing to be correct or "right" at any cost
8. passiveness, submissiveness, fear of powerful people
9. apple polishing, doing favors to gain acceptance
10. rigid conformance to rules, unable to try anything new

Power, anyone? I am aware that some people are so conditioned and entrenched in authority relationships that they turn a deaf ear to all other possibilities. Yet if you are able to admit that you do not have the final answer, if you have a sincere desire to learn alternatives to power relationships, if you would like to know how to "build" common ground between yourself and your child or your spouse, then you can learn new ways of communicating and relating which may enable you to create common ground.

The most effective way to develop effective relating and communicating skills of which I am aware is to get together with other people who have the same interest and secure a human relations skills trainer who will guide you through learning experiences toward goals which are acceptable to you. The key is examined practice. Learning new relating skills is at times uncomfortable and it requires doing, not just talking. It cannot be accomplished overnight, and it may even cost a bit of money. It may give you your sanity.

One of the real tests of relationship effectiveness is: how do you handle conflict? Conflict is a reality of any relationship. One way to handle conflict is with force. This is what most of us have learned and try to do. Or provoke guilt, or resort to deception, or give in. It doesn't hurt to remember that for every winner in conflict, there is also a loser. Yet there are workable alternatives to power relations. The most obvious alternative is to build relationships which make room for both people. The

effective communicator says, "This is where I stand, and (through my listening) I will try to see where you stand too." In this relationship based on understanding (each stands-under the situation of the other) negotiation, resolution and no-loser status is made possible. One of the interesting outcomes of trying to use skills of communication rather than show of power is that one's language shifts from rejection to acceptance. It has long been known, but little practiced, that to reach another's mind you must also reach his heart. Power is really a poor tool for gaining access to heart-felt relationships--acceptance is at least a starting point. Conflict which is openly expressed and dealt with in a family (or classroom) where adults take the lead in saying "I'll try to make room for you, too, in this discussion and in negotiation" will provide children with relating experiences which will be valuable at that moment and later in life.

I'll close by saying that I am strongly convinced that adults can learn new skills for personal effectiveness. Nearly all adults have a lot to learn about relating and communicating. The parent or teacher who learns new and effective skills is likely to get more from his own living relationships. He will certainly have an influence on children for it is through the informal learning which we call imitation that all children learn the really important things in life from the adults who surround them.