

Communication Tip No.1: Let Children Know they are Understood

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Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of Communication Tips on how to more effectively communicate with children and build an appropriate relationship of trust based on your role in the child's life.

As parents, educators and volunteers, we want children to know that we are not only authority figures in their lives, but also people they can trust. It is particularly important to the effort to safeguard the children in our lives that they know that they can come to us if they feel threatened or unsafe. There are a number of effective ways to help children recognize that we value them and can be relied upon to protect them.



To foster authentic trust with children, it is important that they know that you understand them. It is easy to become distracted when children talk to you, especially if you are surrounded by them all day long! However, while much of what young children may say on a daily basis is just chatter, someday they may have something more significant to relate or report. Even young children can perceive when adults are not truly listening to them, so it is essential to be an active listener.

One of the simplest ways to do this is by repeating back what children are telling you. When we paraphrase a story a child has just told us, we are affirming that we heard them and that we understand. A child might, for example, come to us with a long, somewhat rambling story about how another child was teasing them. Rather than just saying “okay”, we could respond by saying, “So, this other child wasn’t being kind to you and he/she really hurt your feelings?” In this way, we are establishing that we are processing what the child is sharing with us. When children feel understood, they are more likely to share in the future, when the stakes are higher.