

Communication

When young people are allowed to express their feelings, particularly their negative feelings it offers them a safety valve. Like the safety valve on a boiler, communicating their feelings in a positive outlet can prevent them from exploding. If a student is systematically taught to keep feelings bottled up, he or she cannot get them out of his or her system, which can contribute to inappropriate behavior.

Young people cannot hold back negative feelings without holding back positive feelings as well. If children are not allowed to express negative feelings, they can grow up to be adults who are unable to express their negative feelings. Bottom line, mentors should give students the freedom to express all of their feelings.

Active Listening

One of the oldest and best ways to foster a sense of trust is to listen. Most individuals are capable of listening, but active listening is a bit harder. It requires you be in the moment, that there is nothing more important than the person who is speaking. Students are more likely to trust someone who really listens and makes them feel important.

- Give your undivided attention.
- If your student is a child much smaller than you, sit when you talk, so you are at about the same level.
- Make eye contact.
- Be aware of your body language.
- Pay attention to your student's facial expressions, gestures, and body language.
- Read between the lines for your student's feelings. Learn to say, "How did that make you feel?"
- Ask open-ended questions. Don't ask, "How was school today?" Instead ask, "What did you do in school today?" Then, as appropriate, ask follow-up questions that are not threatening.
- Paraphrase—restate in your own words—what you think your student has said. When paraphrasing is accurate, your student will feel understood. If it is off the mark, it invites her or him to clarify and also reminds you to listen more closely.
- Put yourself in your student's shoes and try to understand the world from his or her perspective.
- Put aside preconceived ideas and refrain from passing judgment.
- Give your student the same respect that you desire for yourself when you are talking to someone.

When mentors use these techniques, students hear their own feelings coming back to them and will feel they are better understood. A dramatic change may not take place in your student simply as a result of active listening. It is, however, a powerful way to keep lines of communication open.

Communication Traps to Avoid

In any conversation, there are guaranteed ways to stifle communication. Mentors should avoid this type of behavior during conversations with students.

- Telling your student that the way he or she feels is wrong, as in the statement, “It’s silly to feel that way.” Dismissing their feelings could be taken as you dismissing them as a person.
- Not looking at your student when he/she is speaking to you. Put your phone away!
- Sitting slouched over, looking distracted, or other body language that signals disinterest.
- While your student is speaking, thinking about what you’re going to say in reply. Being judgmental and challenging by asking questions that put your student on the spot: “Why didn’t you do better on that test?” “Why did you say that to her?” “How could you possibly think that?”
- Interrupting your student or finishing his or her sentences.