Communication is a key to successful family functioning. Families that communicate in healthy ways are more capable of problem-solving and tend to be more satisfied with their relationships. They clearly find that they have fewer misunderstandings and hurt feelings. That does not mean that they do not have conflict. All families have disagreements. There are many things that families can do to become more effective communicators and in turn to improve the quality of their relationships. Families can improve their communication skills by following some suggestions for building effective family communication:

**Communicate frequently:** One of the most difficult challenges facing families today is finding time to spend together. With our busy schedules, it is difficult to find sufficient time to spend with one another in meaningful conversation. It is extremely important for families to make time to communicate. Talk in the car; turn the TV off and eat dinner together; schedule informal or formal family meetings to talk about important issues that affect your family; and talk to your children at bedtime. There are many creative ways to make time to communicate with other family members.

**Communicate clearly and directly:** Healthy families communicate their thoughts and feelings in a clear and direct manner. This is especially important when attempting to resolve problems that arise between family members (e.g., spouse, parent-child). Indirect and vague communication will not only fail to resolve problems, but will also contribute to a lack of intimacy and emotional bonding between family members.

**Be an active listener:** An essential aspect of effective communication is listening to what others are saying. Being an active listener involves trying your best to understand the point of view of the other person. Whether you are listening to a spouse or a child, it is important to pay close attention to their verbal and non-verbal messages. As an active listener, you must acknowledge and respect the other person's perspective. For example, when listening to a spouse or child, you should nod your head or say, "I understand," which conveys to the other person that you care about what he or she has to say. Another aspect of active listening is seeking clarification if you do not understand the other family member. This can be done by simply asking, "What did you mean when you said...?" or "Did I understand you correctly?" Active listening involves acknowledging and respecting the other person's point of view and/or feelings.

In order for effective communication to take place within families, individual family members must be open and honest with one another. This openness and honesty will set the stage for trusting relationships. Without trust, families cannot build strong relationships. Parents, especially, are responsible for providing a safe environment that allows family members to openly express their thoughts and feelings.

**Pay attention to non-verbal messages:** In addition to carefully listening to what is being said, effective communicators also pay close attention to the non-verbal behaviours of other family members. For example, a spouse or child may say something verbally, but their facial expressions or body language may be telling you something completely different. In cases such as these, it is important to find out how the person is really feeling.

**Be positive:** While it is often necessary to address problems between family members, or to deal with negative situations, effective communication is primarily positive. Marital and family researchers have discovered that unhappy family relationships are often the result of negative communication patterns (e.g., criticism, contempt, defensiveness).

Remember, that healthy communication skills will come with practice!

**Need some guidance on this subject? Contact one of these professionals:**

- CLW offers individual, marriage and family counselling in the Centurion/Midrand area. Referrals can be made nationwide. Contact: Ester de Wet 012 664 7415, edewet@clw.org.za
- FAMSA (Family and Marriage Society) offers nationwide counselling and referrals to families. Tel: (011) 975 7107 or national@famsa.co.za
- Contact your local social worker, doctor, minister or schoolteacher for help and/or referrals.

Reference: changingminds.org/techniques/body/body_language.htm