

Communications Podcast

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0:07 ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Hello. I am ANNMARIE MCMAHILL with the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University. And this is the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

In this ParentingMontana.org podcast we'll be learning about intentional communication. I'd like to introduce our guest for today's podcast, Dr. Kari Finley. Dr. Finley is a licensed clinical social worker who has over a decade of experience working with individuals and families in rural communities. Now, Dr. Finley's a research scholar at Montana State University where her primary research interests are on understanding and creating behavior change, preventing the misuse of substances, and child wellbeing. Kari's a contributing author to many of the tools and resources found on ParentingMontana.org. She's also the mom of an eight year old.

So welcome, Kari. Thanks for being here today.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Hi, thank you. Thanks for having me.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

All right. So we're gonna get started today by having you explain a little bit about what is meant by intentional communication.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Intentional communication is really talking, listening and spending time to really understand your child's point of view. Intentional communication really is about intentionality where you come into the conversation in a different way. You're really trying to engage with your child and understand your child's point of view. As parents, we are working all the time to build our children's skills. And intentional communication is a way that we can build their social/emotional skills and, at the same time, build the relationship that we have with them.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So there's a difference, it sounds like, between talking with your child and not at your child. I know, um, that can be a bit different. I- I think I, I strive for talking with my child. But sometimes it comes out like I am- I'm talking at my child.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

I think with intentional communication you're really creating opportunities where you and your child can listen to each other and understand what the other person or what your child is feeling, as well as what they want and what they need. I think it's also about

modeling. It's modeling a way of communicating that really focuses on the relationship you have with them.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

There are times, I think, that a parent needs to just talk, I guess, at their child, be more direct and, you know, not engage in a conversation. So you are- you are not saying that this is, like, a way of talking all the time, right? There's times where you still need to be super direct with your kids.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

So yes. Absolutely. If their hand is gonna touch a hot stove or you need to stop them from crossing a street without looking, for the most part, intentional communication really focuses on your relationship. But in these instances where they're gonna touch the hot stove or, or cross the street, your focus really is on their safety.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I feel like I'm in that groove of, of being really intentional in my communication, but for example, this morning, um, when I think I tripped on my daughter's shoes for, like, the 10th time this week, I was frustrated. So are you- I want to be direct in that case. But you are saying that this is a time for being more intentional in the way that I talk with her.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

You know, I wouldn't want to engage when you're frustrated and you've just tripped over her shoes. Um, you might need some time first. And then to come back when you both would feel calm and ready to talk. But using intentional communication to have a conversation about her shoes is a great example.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

All right. So help me understand why. Um, because I think, you know, parenting can be difficult. Um, and we have a lot to think about as parents. And so why would a parent want to talk this way with their kids? Or, um, invest their time into figuring out this way of communicating with their kids?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. In addition, I think, to growing and building social and emotional skills, and growing your relationship, intentional communication really fosters a sense of ownership in that communication because it allows your child to be active in the conversation with you. So when your child has a sense of ownership and is active in that in conversation, they're much lik- less likely to feel defensive. This really, I also think, sets up the stage for more challenging issues that are gonna come your way in the future.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So doesn't inviting my daughter into a conversation about her shoes diminish my authority as a parent? There's times I just want her to put her shoes away.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

No. I, you know, I don't think intentional communication undermines your authority as a parent. Instead, I really think it engages your daughter and engaging with her about that issue really does build her skills. It allows her to really think through the issue with you. And I think, as a parent, it helps you to convey, like, what you need as the parent.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

How do you get started in this? I want like concrete examples, what I would do first, when trying to be intentional.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

I think the first piece when you think about intentional communication, you first wanna start by connecting. The relationship that you're building with your child is so important. And you always wanna start by focusing on the relationship before you do anything with the content.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yeah. So what does that- what does that sound like or what does that look like to, to do that?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

I think when you start by connecting, it could look like a hug. Or it could look like saying something like, "You seem stressed. Is that right?" Or, "Are you feeling overwhelmed?"

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That makes sense.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

And then I think after you do that, you'd want to describe the purpose of the conversation. Like tell your child what you really want to talk about so that they know. For younger kids it could be something like, "I'd like to talk about sharing your toys with your sister." Or, um, for an older child, it might look like, "I, you know, I'd like to talk with you about your plans for the weekend." You don't want your child to guess what this conversation is gonna be about. So you wanna really tell them directly.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I, I feel like I do that okay. But sometimes I find myself, and I don't mean to, but I try to like start a conversation just a few minutes before I'm dropping her off at school or in that- those couple of minutes right before she's heading to bed. Our, our days are just

so busy. Her days are so busy. It's really difficult to find a good or quiet time to have a conversation.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. Car rides can be a great time to talk. I've used that strategy myself. But not right before you drop her off at school. (laughs) You also wanna make sure that there is enough time for the conversation. So you might give your- your child a heads up that you wanna find a time to talk with them. Like, you know, "Hey, do you have a few minutes to talk after dinner?" Or, "Let's spend some time, um, after practice to talk about your homework." So letting them know and setting that up, but really making sure there is enough time, um, to have the conversation that you wanna have.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So I've done that before where I've, um ... But it always feels really daunting. Like, you know, we're gonna- do you have a few minutes to talk with me? And so I think that that's different to say, like, hey, do you have a few minutes that we could catch up and talk about homework, is a little bit different by, I think, conveying that purpose. And I think it helps give my daughter ownership over the conversation as well. If, like I'm respecting her and bringing her into that space of saying I don't need to talk right now as you're getting ready to think about your day and heading off to school. But we'll find some time to do it. Is that- is that sort of what you're saying?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. Absolutely. I think it would give her some ownership over the conversation. And finally, I think you, you really wanna also pay attention to your state of mind. Um, and your child's state of mind. So your own emotions and your state of mind as a parent are gonna absolutely influence the way that you listen and talk. And then your child's frame of mind, the same thing. That also matters. So, for example, you know, after a bad game or after flunking a test or something, um, it's not the time to, to talk about practicing or studying more.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Or talking about her routine getting out the door in the morning, it's probably not the best to talk about, you know, five minutes before I'm, I'm dropping her off- I'm dropping her off at school. So, I mean, that makes sense.

So I'm taking notes as you're talking, Kari. And, you know, as a parent what I think I'm hearing you say is when I create the conditions, I wanna connect with them first. Describe the purpose of the conversation and make sure there's enough time available. And really be mindful of my state of mind and, and my kids' state of mind. What's next?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

So after you've created those conditions then you want to actively listen. So active listen involves using a lot of different open ended questions that invite your child to tell their story in their own words.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So what are those- what do open ended questions sound like?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Well, you just asked me one. Uh, so it's really any question that can't- that can't- that can- can't be answered with yes or no.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That makes sense.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

So for example, while listening to a story of your daughter's, you could reflect on what she's saying and then rephrase that. So it might sound like something like, "Can you describe what happened between you and your brother today when you were doing the dishes?" Or it could a- you could ask a question like, "How does this make you feel?" Or, you know, "Help me understand what happened."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Okay.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

And then after she shares her story, you could follow up by reflecting on what you heard her say. So you could say something like, you know, "It sounds like you were wanting to dry the dishes but your brother also wanted to. And you weren't up for letting him have a say so you felt angry when he left. Is that right?" Really by reflecting and rephrasing her story, you are helpful to invite more conversation. Also helping her to build her emotional vocabulary.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like the way this feels and I, I do try to reflect. I have, um, a 13 year old and so oftentimes I assume that she's- is acting in a way or doing something that is different. So by sort of reflecting and rephrasing, um, exactly what I'm hearing her say that I- it helps me not to jump to any conclusions. Are there any tips that you can give parents on active listening? Like, or any traps that we can avoid?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

You know, I think one of the important elements of active listening is body language. And so, you know, as a parent, you don't want to look distracted or look like you're

talking, you know, looking at your phone. Or appear to be in a hurry to hear her story. Your child is gonna pick up on that, uh, in your body language really quickly. And that can make a big difference on the conversation.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Well I'll just say, that's why I kinda like talking when you're driving in a car too. Because I am sitting next to her and I'm, you know, I'm focused out the windshield. 'Cause I think if I were to have those, you know, conversations sitting on the couch together, I think at times my body language would show my frustration. Where, when I'm driving, sometimes that's a nice time to look out the window and being able to talk about big things without really making her defensive.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. Absolutely.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So what are some other things?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

You know, you may hear something you don't like (laughing). When you're inviting someone to tell their story and really actively listening, you might hear something as a parent that you don't- you don't really like. And in those sin- instances, it's important that you avoid interrupting or judging or giving advice like we want to as parents. Interrupting or, you know, giving advice when you've listened, when you're in that state of listening, can be a trap, absolutely, that we can easily fall into. And it can prevent your child from fully engaging with you and, and wanting to share more of those details of- about the story.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So I think this is- this can be really difficult and probably my pitfall, I mean, I have a teenager. So I often- I don't know if I often hear things I don't wanna hear, but I'm always prepared to hear things that I don't wanna hear. And so I find myself jumping right in. Um, it really does take me being intentional and thinking about, you know, staying calm and not interrupting. And then when I'm ready to talk, um, really trying to focus on doing that in intentional ways. So how do I- how do I do that in an intentional way?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

You know, active listening, I think, is just one part of intentional communication. But you're right. It's a two way dialogue. And so it is about listening. But it's also about talking. And so I think I messages can really help you to talk with your child in a way that they can hear.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So give me an example of what that looks like.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

So an I message really- the goal of an I message is to convey the impact of your child's actions without blame. So notice the difference between these two statements. I could say something like, "You are being so rude by slamming the door like that." Or a statement like, "I feel really upset when you slam the door."

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So the second statement, I feel upset when you slam the door, avoids making any guesses about, about the intention behind their behavior. That would really, I think, save my relationship with my daughter quite a few times, I- I can already tell.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. (laughs) I know I don't like it when people accuse me of something. And my first reaction is to become defensive. And, and children are no different. So just setting it up in a way that, that takes ownership, the I portion, really shows the impact on you. And then the you portion is about the behavior that you noticed.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So I like the idea of being able to show my impact. I, I think that it's important that our kids see us as people. And, you know, someone that gets frustrated or I get my feelings hurt. So being able to show the impact of my child's behavior on me, that- I think that makes sense.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. I, I messages usually have three parts. So it's my feeling, your behavior, and the impact. So if we go back to the example of your daughter's shoes on the floor, you could respond by saying, you know, "You are being so inconsiderate, you know, by leaving your shoes everywhere. It's just unacceptable." But unfortunately, that- a statement like that really is gonna shut down the conversation. And it mostly likely is gonna escalate that anger that your child already feels. So using an I message instead, you could say something like, "I feel frustrated when I come home and your things aren't put away." And just taking ownership like I feel frustrated, this allows your child to hear your feelings and it doesn't assign blame.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Yeah. Or I, I feel exhausted when I notice your shoes in the floor. And I have to put them away. Um, my daughter's 13 though. And so I would imagine that by modeling I messages, she's going to be able to respond to me with an I message of her own. Like I can hear her saying, "I feel like you're not listening to me and how busy I am. And that's, you know, why my shoes can't get put away." But I, I can see there's value in each of us

being able to be heard. And, you know, being really conscientious about an I message would help, would help build our relationship. DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. I messages really do, I think, invite your child into a conversation with you where both of you can leave with a better understanding of each other and how you're feeling. And, hopefully, a solution for how to change things in the future.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That make sense.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Yeah. And then the final part of intentional communication really is about apologizing when you need to.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

That, that can be hard for a parent to do.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

But I think it's so important. Apologizing or admitting when you're wrong is really modeling and demonstrating vulnerability. It's demonstrating a willingness to grow. And it normalizes mistakes. It helps your child understand that, you know, mistakes are part of learning and getting better.

Having to apologize is not a failure. Um, instead it really does strengthen the relationship that you have with your child and it provides an opportunity for reflection.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I like the opportunity of em- emphasizing apologizing because I think, again, it's important for our kids to see us as people. And that, you know, you said apologizing isn't a failure. I- I think that parents feel like they're failing a lot when it comes to raising their kids. We- there's a lot that influence us as parents right now. Um, I, I also don't think that we always know how to give a good apology. So what advice do you give on, like, how, how to apologize to your kids?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

You know, the most important thing in apologizing is to be genuine. And be specific about what you're apologizing for. You know, just a couple of tips. I would make sure to avoid adding words like if or but after your apology. So, for example, I wouldn't say, you know, "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings." Or, "I'm sorry for hurting your feelings but when you continue not to listen to me, I feel upset." So just avoiding those, like, if or but, uh, words in an apology is important. Both of these apologies with if or but put the blame on the child. Keep the apology specific and short and then give your child some time to respond to you.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

I really appreciate, like, these concrete steps, um, about intentional communication and there is a lot to it. But what advice would you give to the parents listening right now that feel a bit intimidated about where to start?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Start slow. Choose one topic to practice. Uh, maybe you wanna build your child's confidence or grow their reading skills. I think it's best not to start with an issue that you've already been facing. Um, you- from the website, print out intentional communication from the I wanna know more section of Parenting Montana and use it as a guide, put it on your fridge, um, have it available to you when you're practicing.

I also think that printing out the feelings chart can be helpful for your child of any age. Learning how to understand and name our feelings is a skill that we can always continue to grow.

You can also find steps to take built into each tool for the age of your child on the website. Each tool comes with a tool summary that you can print and, and put those as a reminder where you're gonna see them, you know, on your fridge or in a place that, that you, you know, on your bathroom mirror. And as you become more familiar with the process, your confidence will build.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So I have a few more questions. Um, I was just reflecting back on your training as a licensed clinical social worker. And so from that lens, and from, you know, working with parents and families that you've done in the past, what are some things that you wish parents knew about communication?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

One of the things I wish parents knew about communication is that it's a- it's a two way street. It's always- we, we cou- we say it's a conversation when we're like telling or lecturing, but really if you think about all of the issues that we work on with our children, we wanna think about communication as a two way street. We do really want to invite our kids into a dialogue with us. And so thinking about, as a parent, how to do that. How do you invite a conversation with your child and having that two way dialogue is really, I think, um, something that I, I have learned as a social worker. Um, but I think it's, it's advice for parents.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

Well, and I think it's a- it's a skill. So it's a skill that you're learning as a parent. It's a skill that you're teaching your kid that will stay with them. Um, I think at times, you know, when you talk about communication in this way it can feel like it's not real. You know, a lot of times I have a lot of emotion coming into a, like, you know, shoes on the floor one more time. I mean, I'm naturally frustrated by that. But I think the difference with

intentional communication is I- I've practiced it so many times that I know I need to probably not address it in the moment. I need to take a deep breath, get my own emotions under control. And then have a real conversation with her, not just tell her what to do or tell her what I want her to do in that moment.

But it's so important when she can see me as a human and a mom to say, you know, gosh I'm- I've been at work all day, like I'm tired. I just would like to come home and not have shoes everywhere. And it's created this great space for us as a family to, I think, be seen and, and be heard and know that, you know, when we address little issues like shoes, when bigger issues come down the road, we're gonna have this platform to be able to talk from. Because, you know, she's 13. So big issues are coming. If, if we're facing some of those big issues, the communication style is still the same, right? You would still stay with this intentional- tips for intentional communication.

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Absolutely. Yeah. Uh, and when you start with smaller issues, you can practice. And so it- and then when those big issues come around, you- you're in such a better place to continue that dialogue. Um, so practicing, I think, is a big- a big piece that we can do as parents.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So what would you want parents or those in a parenting role listening to today's podcast, uh, what would you want them to remember from today? Like if you could pick out the one thing from what we've talked about?

DR. KARI FINLEY:

Learning this way of communication doesn't happen by chance. Um, and it doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and effort to learn something new. So it's important just to give yourself permission to not do it perfectly. It's okay to make a plan, to practice with, you know, one small issue. Um, and it might not be successful right away. But just keep practicing.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

So Kari, thanks so much for being here today. I appreciate the time that you've given.

DR. KARI FINLEY

Oh, thank you. I really enjoyed our conversation.

ANNMARIE MCMAHILL:

And so the key take away from what I'm hearing today is intentional communication is a style of communicating where both parents and the child get their needs met. By engaging in intentional communication you're increasing the likelihood that both of you are heard. And this type of communication is done through creating conditions, active listening, using eye messages, and apologizing when needed. Intentional

communication has benefits for both parents and kids like growing social and emotional skills and encouraging curiosity. Teaching and modeling effective communication grows a healthy relationship between a parent and a child. Information on intentional communication can be found under the Communications tab in the “I Wanna Know More” section of ParentingMontana.org. In addition, check out the feelings chart, a way to teach feeling words to help in emotional growth in the same section. You could also find an easy to use rack card on intentional communication in the website's media section.

So thank you for joining us today. Keep checking back for additional podcasts, tools and resources being added to ParentingMontana.org.

22:17 VOICEOVER

The ParentingMontana.org podcast is produced by the Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University in collaboration with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service and is brought to you by the Offices of Child Care, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Montana Department of Public Health and Human Service.

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Our theme music is Reasons to Hope from Reed Mathis

Thanks for listening to the ParentingMontana.org podcast.

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