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COMMUNICATION BASICS

A. THREE CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

One of the most important principals we need to have in mind about communication is that you cannot not communicate. We are always communicating, even when we are silent. Communication is the human connection. It is the tie that binds us together. Anything we accomplish happens because of our communication. We need to become aware of the influence that we have on other people and that they have on us. One way to look at communication is to think of it as occurring on several levels:

- 1) One channel is the actual words spoken, the elements we traditionally think of as language and refer to as "communication".
- 2) A second is the non-verbal channel. The meaning of a message is in the non-verbal packaging as well as in the words. Non-verbal messages are communicated with our bodies, silence, time and space. The non-verbal code is difficult to read. Be tentative about interpreting non-verbal messages and think about how cultural differences might get applied in the non-verbal code.
- 3) The third channel is made of the feelings, which are experienced in the course of an interaction. The verbal and non-verbal channels can be directly observed. The feelings channel is not easy to observe or to express. Remember that people are going to have feelings about the situation, about you and about themselves.

B. CONGRUENCE VS NON-CONGRUENCE

When someone's behavior is not congruent there is a discrepancy between the verbal, nonverbal and feelings parts of a message. This is called the double message. For example the person who says "I love you" in a sarcastic tone of voice. Whenever there is this kind of discrepancy between the verbal and non-verbal and feelings message, people tend to believe the non-verbal. Given all the variables it is easy to see why misunderstanding occurs between people.

Ideally the three channels match and this is called congruence. Ideally there is no conflict between what a person says, what is conveyed by the body language and what he/she is feeling. If a person who feels distrust for you speaks to you of that distrust and uses body language that matches both speech and feeling that person's communication is congruent. We need to be aware when someone is sending non-congruent communication and strive for congruence in our own.

C. POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

In addition to striving for congruent communication, you will also need to look closely at the quality of the relationship you want to encourage by your communication style. A positive communication style creates a relaxed, comfortable, trustful, and psychologically safe feeling. There is a reduction in anxiety or threat and increased likelihood that messages will be received and difficult subjects will be discussed. You can tell if things are not going well if the people you are trying to talk with are hostile, uneasy, show reduced motivation or readiness to hear what's being said. A major clue is reduced willingness to agree to meetings. Positive communication relationships are critical to your ability to serve the children in your case. Good communication relationships require that you:

- Look at yourself and understand what attitudes and behaviors you may bring to the setting.
- Understand something about the people with whom you will be meeting and the attitudes and behaviors they may bring to the setting.

D. COMMUNICATING WITH BIRTH FAMILY MEMBERS

*(Though this section was written with CASA volunteers in mind,
the basic concepts and issues are applicable to communication between foster and birth families)*

The most important attitudes you can bring to meetings with parents and families are the ability to suspend judgement, a willingness to listen with respect and an appreciation of the stress court intervention has created. The very nature of your involvement makes it especially difficult to remain non-judgmental toward the families you read about in the court records. The nature of the court petition itself, which describes the reasons for court intervention, focuses on the most negative information conceivable. You will read shocking and graphic descriptions of the abuse or neglect that they inflicted upon their child before you ever meet them. Certainly these are not the types of introductions that make it easy to think positively about anyone, especially when the recipient of their negative behaviors is a child.

However, uncontrolled negativism or judgement, which causes you to react in a hostile or discourteous way, will seriously compromise your ability to work on behalf of your child. You may not listen, you may overreact, you may neglect to ask pertinent questions because you have already formulated the answers in your mind, your reaction may trigger angry feelings, or you may become embroiled in a confrontation which deflects your focus on the child. You need to understand your own feelings and also those the parents may be feeling. Most will be feeling a wide range of emotions including fear, anger hostility and confusion. Many will not understand your role or simply see you as one more person in a long line of "Others" who can't possibly understand.

Remember that the future of the child you advocate for may depend on these people and your ability to effectively work with parents and family. They are important in your efforts to understand what has happened and what is best for the child. The child is connected to these people in a manner that cannot be ignored. They play a part in the child's life.