

## LEARNING HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH CHILDREN

Prepared by,  
Kimberly Gerlach, LCSW, CTS  
Psychotherapist, Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine, Children's Hospital of Wisconsin

### **The first step in talking with children is *active listening*.**

Prepare yourself for active listening by being sure you are calm and that you are able to manage your own fears.

Active listening entails being attentive, an environment free of distractions such as the television, the phone, the baby; showing your interest by nods, smiles and encouraging expression; inviting elaboration; paying attention to what the child may *not* be saying (noticing body language, posture, tone of voice or gestures that may reflect strong emotion).

**Be sure you know what it is the child is really asking.** You may need to ask clarifying questions and/or summarize. It is important to be careful that you do not assume you know what a child means, and that you do not project your own concern onto their attempts to explain their worries.

**Don't be judgmental, but rather accepting of anything the child may need to say.** Let children know that differences of opinion are okay, that it is normal for them to be worried, but try to correct obvious misconceptions and misunderstandings. Share the facts that are known.

**Be honest and do not try to minimize.** Acknowledge that this may be a frightening time and that we all wish things were different but reassure that we are working to be safe. Children who sense an adult's attempt to minimize will be left less able to trust that adult.

**Listen to what children say in whatever way they say it.** Sometimes children will communicate by their behavior. The emergence of new fears, for example, tells us that a child is feeling unsafe. Themes of aggression, loss etc. in their play, let us know of their struggles to understand these issues. Some children will need to draw or make up stories to let us know what is worrying them.

**Make sure your child has an opportunity to respond to your comments.** It is important that you do not move on to a new topic or question before the child has finished. "What else?" or "Can you think of anything we missed?" may be helpful.

**Reassure you child.** It is very important to let your child know that many people, police, teacher, soldiers, government, are working hard to keep them safe. Be sure your child knows where you are at all times. It may help a child to repeat that *you* know that they are worried but that you believe they are safe.

**You do not have to have all the answers.** If you don't know the answer to a child's question, do not try to make one up. Let your child know that you think the question is a good one and that you will try to find the answer. Sometimes you must say that no one really knows the answer but that there are many opinions (ideas) about this. What is their idea?

**Communicating with your child is never a one-shot deal.** Children learn best by repetition. They are comforted when they know we think enough about what they say to ask them about it later.