

Putting it All Together: Shaping Curriculum, Topics, and Activities

Communication Activity Examples

In FI, communication is a concept addressed throughout the entire process. Communication is the most basic aspect of how we, as human beings, relate. It shows up in our words, facial expressions, body language, and intentions. Communication exists in the messages we want to relay and how we expect it will be received.

Communication Sandwich: Reframing Always and Never

- The facilitator will define the “communication sandwich”: top layer is the stated message. The middle layer is one’s interpretation and the bottom layer is filled with underlying beliefs/reactions. It will be drawn on the board as an actual sandwich.

- One family will model the communication sandwich, layer by layer, to get unstuck in their communication. The facilitator will guide participants in sharing the actual words used, what they meant to communicate, and the feelings/thoughts present while the interaction was occurring. The facilitator will support the participant in reviewing what could’ve been occurring for the other person as well (using the sandwich model.)

- Usually, the bottom layer, is a generalized statement that has an “always” or “never” attached. For example, “she never appreciates me.” The facilitator will support the participant with evaluating the underlying belief, by asking: Is it really true? Have there ever been any exceptions? Most families begin noticing exceptions and can begin imagine new interactions as possible.

- Variations: Parent child break out groups (simultaneously working and then regrouping to share insights, which offers room for candid conversations.

Topic #2: Negotiation, Conflict, & Cooperation

According to Webster’s New College dictionary, negotiation is to “arrange an agreement.” It is one the hallmarks of human interactions. We are constantly

arranging and rearranging, cancelling and starting agreements. Within families, it is dynamic and multilayered. However, it's just an agreement that has been arranged, and can be scrapped when needed.

Voice Tone

- Parents have often highlighted voice tone as an important theme to address in the family, regarding communication and negotiation. In this activity, passive, aggressive, and assertive body language and voice tones are humorously labeled monster, baby, serious/ “normal” voice, respectively. It is an opportunity for parents and children to develop self awareness about their general communication styles.
- The facilitator will ask 3-4 participants to select a voice tone and corresponding posture, and exaggerate it. Next, they will ask someone in the group for something, for example “Can you pass the plate.” The person receiving the question will share his/her impression of the question and their feelings, and probable response if spoken to in that way.
- Variation: If parents mention being yellors or that their children are whiners, have them switch voice tones. Support the families in reflecting upon the feelings that arise and results from the different tones. Support family members understanding the point of view of the other. Ask families to describe the last time there was an exception, an alternative voice tone or style was used, and list the outcomes. Ask if the ‘exception’ could be repeated at least once or twice more between group sessions.

Topic # 3: Peeling the Onion: Working Through Anger & ‘Shut Downs’

In FI, children and parents decipher anger, review the thinking and actions which preceded the situation, and ‘paint a clearer picture’ of what happened. In this self-reflection, participants identify options that might help when and if a similar situation reoccurs.

Peeling the Onion Dialogue:

- This is a step-by-step method of self-reflection about anger/being shut down. Usually children are first asked to describe anything that has layers. Mangos, birthday cake, clothes, onions, whatever comes to mind.
- Afterwards, the facilitator guides participants in thinking about anger, as well as other feelings, as having layers. The outer layer is what you can see on the surface—the peel. Participants can act out and exaggerate

typical outward responses, such as stomping, yelling, throwing soft objects. It is a good energizer for such an abstract conversation.

- The middle layer is what can't be seen but can be identified after consideration, which are the thoughts and feelings right underneath the physical reactions, such as anger, frustration, or pain.
- The innermost layer, the core, consists of beliefs, which the facilitator will share often goes unnoticed, and could be at the center of the reaction. Because this is very abstract, the group can come up with an example that can be "peeled." The group will make guesses about what is inside of each layer of the reaction. The form below has been used with limited success with children, but great success with parents. A conversation, drawing or demonstration, has worked much better for children. Peeling the Onion creates a common language about anger or feeling shut down that families can refer back to and use to work through it. *Please refer to the Peeling the Onion worksheet in the appendix.*

Topic #4: Building Attention

In FI, attention is approached as an ability that is developed. It is built into all activities that the group performs. Attention is affected by many circumstances, such as learning or developmental disorders, age, allergies, chemical sensitivities, and one's setting. Highlighting these factors allow parents and children to create expectations that match the reality of their lives.

Gardening:

- Gardening, touching the earth, seeing colors, smelling different scents, and even tasting crops can be extremely engaging. Having activities that engage all of the senses, is interesting, and fun is a great way to build attention within a group. Notice the way participants attend to something of interest, so they can observe that strength within themselves and apply it during a less engaging, but needed task.

Following Sequences:

- During activities, instructions are used constantly. They are either created by participants or facilitators. Parents may observe their children having a hard time following instructions at home, which could often be attributed to being stubborn, lazy, or defiant. In reality this could be because the instructions were unclear. Practice multiple forms of delivering instructions, at least in visible and audible ways.

Encourage children and parents to play with creating instructions for each other. It could assist them in developing empathy for each other and figuring out which style works best. For example, have a parent and child make instructions for the same activity, such as cleaning the room. Notice which steps each may have been included or left out. It could help clarify expectations.

Dance:

- Ask participants to write out dance steps like “The Macarena” and have the other group members follow the steps exactly. Debrief what was difficult in giving or following the instructions. Variation: Mother May I with a younger group or Follow the Leader. This can even be done blindfolded in a space with furniture pushed back.

Craft Projects:

- Crafts are a great way to practice generating an idea, planning steps, and following instructions, while practicing how to initiate and complete a task. Frustration comes up often during these types of activities. This is a good activity to do during the middle stage of the group. If frustration comes up, address it, process it, have the participants notice their reactions. It will help at home and at school.

Facilitator Tips: Reminders, Common Pitfalls & Frustrations

Overall Reminders for Communication, Negotiation and Working Through Anger & ‘Shut Down’, and Attention Building Activities

- Deciphering non verbal communication during group is a useful tool in heightening awareness of one’s communication strategies and whether or not it is effective in that moment. It can even be a game the group can use to practice verbalizing what they, or others, are feeling.
- In group, evaluate the outcomes of communication together. What is the ripple effect? Was it what one wanted? How could it have been said differently?
- Group provides a space where people can experience a window of time together, in which their communication styles and behaviors can emerge. Whatever conflicts occur in their lives could occur in group. Remind families that this is a great opportunity and a safe space. In group,

everyone is committed to work with each other and through difficulties. It is during this work, that the skills are practiced. Unfortunately, at first, parents or the child may feel embarrassed. Assure them that in this context, power comes from being able to notice patterns and outcomes. A chance exists to see a common occurrence have a radically different ending than it does usually. It can be incredibly inspiring for the group, family, and individual.

- Be sensitive to what is being expressed. Create opportunities for teachable moments, but know when not to interfere. Real life communication is happening in the group right now. If a family is having a hard time in communicating you can support as it is useful for the family in the moment and group.

Common Pitfalls & Frustrations

- Be mindful of managing time well. Going too far with a “light bulb” moment could result in losing the group. Create space for the participants to be experts on their own feelings and needs.
- All parents want their children to succeed. During group, children and parents may feel pressure to come up with “smart” comments that always “make sense”. Parents in particular may feel this pressure because their children’s contributions (or apparent nonparticipation) seem to reflect upon them. Children may experience this because they want to please. Acknowledge this probability in the beginning, so everyone can relax and do it less, eventually.
- It is important to recognize any attempt that participants make to contribute or to communicate. They are showing willingness to take risks. Bring non-verbal communication into the room.
- Be curious about non verbal communication. Ask questions and don’t assume that you understand. Reserve conclusions. Don’t step over the impact of communication in group. Explore it with the group as a learning moment for everyone to notice patterns.
- Don’t take it personally when the plan that you have laid out becomes obsolete. Go with it.

- If a child is continuously attending to something else—like a handheld video game or cell phone—and a parent tries to snatch it away, ask first if the parent can share the impact of the child’s actions upon him/her (if it seems appropriate and constructive for the group.) Ask parents to share with a child why a request for attention was made. It will help the child to later integrate the result with the attention given. As a facilitator, ask the group to relate to both the child and the parent. It makes for a learning moment for the group.