

Communicating During the Holidays

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The challenges that we have all faced since the onset of COVID-19 are still present. The holiday season is upon us and for some us the holiday season adds to one's stress level. As individuals and families plan holiday gatherings, many are wondering how topics about politics, health, wealth, or a favorite sport team will come up in conversation. Additionally, children and young people may experience a variety of emotions during the holidays and have a difficult time expressing themselves in words which can lead to misguided behaviors and hurt feelings.

Whether it is an adult chat after a holiday meal or a conversation with children after opening presents, using good communication skills can prevent misunderstandings and avoid heart ache.

Below are some strategies to help youth (and adults) communicate throughout the holidays.

- **Engage in active listening.** Active listening is the critical when responding to children and adults. Engage in active listening by allowing the person talking to finish, simply don't interrupt the person talking. If you desire more information ask questions to gain understanding instead of jumping to conclusions. Simply, say, "Tell me more." Use "I" statements instead of making comments like "you never help clean the house." Passing judgement, interrupting, name calling and yelling will close the door on future conversations and can contribute to a lifetime of hurt.
- **Engage in conversation with your children.** Be intentional about taking the time to talk with your children. Simply, ask them about their day or what is bringing them joy, happiness or what they are finding difficult. If not meeting friends and family in-person over the holidays, schedule a virtual meeting for children to interact with grandparents,

aunts, uncles, or other extended family members. . These social interactions can help young people feel valued and supported.

- **Acknowledge your child’s (or other’s) feelings.** Simply ask them how they are feeling. As an adult check-in with them daily about what feelings they are experiencing. As your child is sharing their feelings with you, make sure you are listening and not passing judgement. Try as best as you can to keep the lines of communication open. As an adult be a good role model and take the time to express your own feelings with family members. Showing ways to communicate one’s feelings in a healthy manner provides a positive example for young people.
- **Respond with empathy.** Offer words of encouragement and support. Think about how you would want others to respond if they were listening to you. Use words like “that might be hard” or “I haven’t thought about it that way.”
- **Stay calm.** If conversations do get heated remember that it is important to stay calm. It is okay to take a short walk or remove yourself from the situation for a minute or two so that you can calm down and regain your composure.
- **Remember the “big picture”.** The reality is that we all need to support one another to make it through life. Friendships, family ties, and community connections are what make life worth living. Getting upset about politics, religion, or long time family issues will not be helpful, instead, it can create divisions that take a lifetime to heal. Choose your words wisely.

These communication strategies can be helpful in family gatherings, chatting with the teenage neighbor, or lifelong friends, or with the sales clerk at the grocery store. — Take this holiday season to use words of love, joy, and peace. More information and resources about

youth social-emotional development can be found at www.4h.unl.edu/supporting-young-people-through-change or by contacting your local county Nebraska Extension office.