

Views from VanDeWalle

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Communicating During the Holidays

The challenges that we have all faced since the onset of COVID-19 are still present. The holiday season is upon us, and this year could be more stressful than previous years given the current challenges and events of 2021. As individuals and families plan holiday gatherings, many are wondering how hot 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 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 hurt feelings. Below are some strategies to help youth (and adults) communicate throughout the holidays.

- Engage in active listening. In responding to children and adults, engage in active listening. Listening is the key. Allow the person talking to finish. 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, schedule a virtual meeting for children to interact with grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other extended family members over the holidays. 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 youth how to show and communicate one's feelings in a healthy fashion provides a positive example for young people. Allow this to be a time to share differing viewpoints in a healthy manner, while acknowledging differences among family members may always exist.
- 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, lifelong friends, or with Santa at the mall. 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](#).

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