

**British Columbia Foster Care
Education Program**

**CARING FOR CHILDREN:
COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND
SELF-AWARENESS**

(3 hours)

Ministry of Children and Family Development

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Legislation, Policies, and Principles Underlying Curriculum

Legislation, policies, and principles of the Ministry of Children and Family Development underlie the development and delivery of the curriculum for the British Columbia Foster Care Education Program.

Participants should be familiar with the following:

- Child, Family and Community Service Act, particularly sections on guiding principles, service delivery, best interests of the child, and the rights of children-in-care.
- Standards for Foster Homes
- Guardianship of Children and Youth-in-Care – A Model of the British Columbia Guardianship Program
- Condensed Assessment and Comprehensive Plan of Care
- Looking After Children Assessment and Action Record and Comprehensive Plan of Care
- Practice Standards for Guardianship
- Pre-Service Foster Parent Orientation Curriculum.

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Table Of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
A. RATIONALE	2
B. LEARNING OUTCOMES	2
C. PREPARATION	2
TRAINER'S INSTRUCTIONS	4
1. WELCOME, INTRODUCTIONS, AND AGENDA	6
2. CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS	9
3. SELF AWARENESS	14
4. COMMUNICATION SKILLS.....	19
5. CLOSURE.....	27
REFERENCES	29
APPENDIX I: HANDOUTS.....	31
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS	32
AGENDA.....	33
LEARNING OUTCOMES	34
CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATOR	35
SELF-AWARENESS EXERCISE	36
WHY LISTENING WORKS	38
COMMON MISTAKES MADE IN LISTENING.....	39
RESPONDING WITH EMPATHY – A CASE STUDY	40
RESPONDING WITH EMPATHY – EXERCISE	43
EMPATHIC RESPONDING OBSERVATION GUIDE	44
SUGGESTED RESOURCES	45
APPENDIX II: OVERHEADS	46
APPENDIX III: EVALUATION TOOL	56

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

A. RATIONALE

Effective caregivers have the ability to develop relationships which are characterized by genuineness, warmth, acceptance, and trust with children, youth, families, and other members of the care team. Important to these relationships is the caregiver's commitment to self-reflection and self-awareness. Knowing how their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, values, rules, etc. impact their relationships, enables caregivers to respond more consciously and effectively to others.

A caregiver may know several ways to work with a child's behaviour. The caregiver also needs to know how to really listen to the child's experience in order to relate more effectively to him.

This module teaches caregivers about the importance of self-reflection and the communication skills of attending and responding. Self-awareness and effective communication are foundational to the caregiver's ability to facilitate the development of healthy relationships with children, youth, and families.

B. CUSTOMIZING AND CORE THEMES FOR TRAINING

This training is a joint project of the British Columbia Federation of Foster Parent Associations and the Ministry for Children and Families. A set of core themes runs throughout all training modules. They are:

- Vulnerability of all children and youth-in-care
- Teamwork
- Child and youth development
- Communications
- Guiding children's behavior
- Family support
- Diversity
- Inclusion
- The Ministry for Children and Families Guardianship Model.

It is helpful that the foster parent has an understanding of the following material:

- Child, Family and Community Service Act
- Standards for Foster Homes
- Guardianship of Children and Youth-in-Care – A Model of the British Columbia Guardianship Program
- Looking after Children Assessment and Action Record.

C. LEARNING OUTCOMES The caregiver can:

- articulate the importance of being an effective communicator throughout the caregiving process.
- describe the characteristics of an effective communicator and their connection to effective caregiving.
- articulate an awareness of how self in relationships influences communication and begin to identify how the caregiver's own experience impacts caregiving relationships.
- demonstrate, at an introductory level, the basic communication skills of attending and empathy.

TRAINER'S INSTRUCTIONS

- Effective communication skills are fundamental to caregiving relationships and are required at every level of the caregiving process whether communication is with a member of the care team, the resource worker, or with the child or youth placed in care or her family.
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B. Agenda and Learning Outcomes**Instructions:**

The importance of effective communication and specific skills will be emphasized throughout this module and, as opportunities arise, in subsequent modules.

Here are some examples the foster parent can think about:

When a child or youth first joins your family, it is very important to assist him to feel safe and comfortable in your home. It is important to be warm, accepting, and genuine and to listen to his expression of experiences, feelings, and needs. Remember that the child's or youth's journey through foster care began before he arrived in your home. Be open to opportunities to hear the child talk about and process this experience. Also, clearly verbalizing your thoughts, feelings, and expectations helps the child or youth to get to know you and may reduce his anxiety.

Effective communication skills are also necessary when communicating with the child or youth's worker, family, and other members of the care team about expectations, needs, and goals. When communicating with the child, use language that is developmentally appropriate and ensure that cultural needs are met.

While the child or youth is in your care, model and support the open discussion of feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Help the child or youth to learn new ways of expressing himself. Model

appropriate boundaries and respect the child's or youth's boundaries.

During the process of the child or youth leaving your home, it is important for caregivers and families to express their feelings about the impending separation and to encourage the child or youth to express her feelings clearly to reduce misunderstandings and acting-out behaviors. It is also important for caregivers to validate the child or youth's feelings about her accomplishments and ability to be successful. Listening actively with empathy can help the child or youth to be successful and become clear about her strengths thereby increasing her self-esteem.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS

(20 minutes)

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can describe the characteristics of effective communicators and make the connection to effective caregiving.

Materials:

Handout

- Handout #4 Characteristics of an Effective Communicator

Overhead

- Overhead #4 Characteristics of an Effective Communicator

Instructions:

Refer participants to the Handout #4, "Characteristics of an Effective Communicator," and compare this list with the list they previously developed.

The characteristics have been listed according to whether they represent "Knowledge," "Skills," or "Self,"

It is generally agreed that effective communication requires an integration between what you know, what you can do, and who you are. For example, knowledge about communication is not sufficient to communicate effectively. The ability to use skills effectively requires knowledge about

when and how to use them. Furthermore, you need to pay attention to the interpersonal aspect of communication. If, for example, you respond in a cold and uncaring manner, then your communicated message will be virtually ineffective regardless of how accurate your skills and knowledge. (Corey and Corey, 1997).

Being an effective communicator is fundamental to being an effective caregiver.

The list of “Characteristics of an Effective Communicator” is presented below along with additional suggested points to cover.

Characteristics of an Effective Communicator

Knowledge:

- Display basic curiosity:
 - Realize what you don't know and be willing to take steps to find out, e.g. a commitment to understanding the child's or youth's or family's experience as they see it.
- Use language that matches the rules, customs, and development of the child, youth, or family:
 - The language of a four-year-old is different from that of a 15-year-old.
 - When you respond, try to use language familiar to the child youth or family.
- Communicate with an understanding of the cultural aspects of non-verbal and verbal communication:
 - Recognize that eye contact has different meaning for different cultures.
 - In some cultures, it is customary to address the father in a family first before speaking with others in the family.

Skills:

- Demonstrate open posture:
 - Hold your body in an open manner while communicating. This will be specifically discussed later in the module.

- Stay with the speaker:
 - Respond to what the speaker is communicating rather than to your own agenda.
- Respond to feelings of the speaker with empathy or reflecting feelings:
 - Acknowledge that you've learned to respond to the content rather than to the affect of a message (we'll be learning more about this later.)
- Use open questions:
 - Ask questions that begin with "How," "What," "When," "Who," or "Where," recognizing that closed questions (are, is, will, did, does) can be answered with a yes or no and may require a second question. Specific and clear information can be obtained more effectively from open questions.
 - In our society, we tend to overuse questions as a means of communication. This can be experienced by children, youth, or families as interrogations and boundary violations which hinder the ability to build relationships based on trust and respect.
 - It is often more effective to respond with empathy than to ask questions.
 - When at all possible, avoid asking "Why" questions. Young children often answer with "I don't know," and people of all ages often experience "why" questions as accusatory.
 - Most "Why" questions can be revised as "How" or "What" questions. Compare, "Why did you pull your sister's hair?" with "What were you feeling when you pulled your sister's hair?"
- Attend and respond to verbal as well as non-verbal communication:
 - While verbal content can be the most important, much of the meaning of the message offered is frequently non-verbal (Mehrabian and Ferris, 1967; Shebib, 1997) and may need tending to, for example, "You say that you are fine, yet I notice that you are holding back tears."
 - Non-verbal communication can be a more accurate guide to feelings because it is more difficult to consciously censor.
 - Non-verbal communication can have the following purposes:
 - to confirm a verbal message
 - to contradict a verbal message
 - to replace a verbal message.

- Effective communicators simultaneously observe the non-verbal messages and listen to the verbal messages of children and youth and monitor the impact of their own non-verbal behaviour.
- Interpret non-verbal communication with care. It is impossible to say with absolute certainty the meaning of particular behaviours. Be tentative and check out your interpretations.
- Switch between speaker-listener roles in conversation smoothly and frequently:
 - Good communicators do not speak so much that others have few opportunities to be heard or so little that others aren't certain if they are being understood. In either case "making contact" can be difficult or blocked.
- Respond appropriately to the feedback of others:
 - Rather than defending against, discounting, or ignoring the feedback about our behaviour, consider and respond to the feedback given by others.
- Summarize:
 - it is an important communication skill and involves not just parroting back the content of the speaker's message but responding to the core feelings and experiences of the speaker.
- Postpone interpretation:
 - Interpreting the behavior, feelings, and thoughts of others too soon can lead to serious errors in understanding and responding.
 - It is more effective to focus on and respond to the experiences of the child or youth as they express their experiences rather than interpreting their experiences based on your own experiences, beliefs, and agendas.
- Use clear, specific, concrete statements.

Self:

- Be genuine:
 - What and how you communicate is real and honest.
- Be warm:

- Feeling and demonstrating warmth towards the child or youth facilitates contact and builds relationships.
- Be accepting
- Be respectful:
 - Communicate a respect for differences, for the humanness of the individual, and for his ability to make choices.
- Be patient:
 - Allow the child or youth the time she needs to tell her story, communicate concerns, joys, etc. Avoid finishing her sentences or looking too “busy” to really listen to her.
- Be aware of and monitor your own thoughts and feelings and their impact on the ability to hear and respond to the experience of the other. (We'll be looking at this in more detail later on in the module).
- Suspend judgment:
 - “We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses.” (Carl Jung, in Psychological Reflections)
- Use “I” statements and take responsibility and ownership for your thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, actions: e.g. “I feel disappointed when you don't keep your promises.”
- Understand and respect boundaries:
 - “Boundaries are limits that allow for a safe connection based on the [child's or youth's] needs.” (Peterson, 1992, p.74)
 - The effective communicator or caregiver can determine where the child or youth ends and she begins.
 - All have physical, emotional, sexual, spiritual, and relational boundaries.
 - “We learn about our boundaries by the way we are treated as children. Then we teach others where our boundaries are by the way we let them treat us.” (Katherine, 1991, p. 7)
 - Effective communicators listen for messages about boundaries then respond to these messages by respecting those boundaries. For example:
 - Caregiver: “How was your visit with your mom today?”
 - Child: “Fine.”
 - Caregiver: “What do you mean by ‘fine’?”
 - Child: “I don't wanna talk about it.”

Caregiver: "OK, I'm here to listen if and when you do want to talk about it."

3. SELF AWARENESS
(40 minutes)

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can articulate an awareness of how self in relationships influences communication and begin to identify how the caregiver's own experience impacts caregiving relationships.

Materials:

Handout

- Handout #5 Self-Awareness Exercise

Overhead

- Overhead #5 Self Awareness Exercise

Instructions:

Please read the following quote:

"When you want to recognize and understand what takes place in the minds of others, you have to first look into yourself." (Theodor Reik, Listening with the Third Ear)

In your own words, deliver the following information on the importance of self-awareness.

Regardless of the context, the issues, the participants, the level of skill or knowledge, one always brings one's "self" to the interpersonal exchange.

The development of self is impacted by the totality of our experiences and in turn impacts our communication and relationships with others. The self can be seen to include all of our beliefs, values, ethics, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, needs, successes, failures, etc. As caregivers become more conscious of the various aspects of self, they are able to respond more intentionally and communicate more effectively with children, youth, families, and workers.

Foster parents can reflect on one example of how they became aware of a previously unconscious belief (for example), how it impacted their relationship with a child or youth, and what, if any, changes they made to the belief in order to participate more effectively in the relationship.

You may also want to read the following example.

The experience of growing up in a family where there was violence will impact the development of the caregiver's beliefs, feelings, thoughts, etc. about violence. If the caregiver has a rule, as a result of this experience, that hitting under any circumstances is not acceptable, then this rule will effect how she responds to a child or youth who has hit another child. If the caregiver experiences a lot of intense feelings about this issue, it may interfere with other rules that she has about effective communication. For example, the caregiver may raise her voice when speaking to the child about the hitting incident, even if she also has a rule that yelling is unacceptable. The caregiver experiences this as a conflict.

In the example, if the caregiver is aware of the conflicting beliefs, she is in a better position to effectively respond to the child and may choose to seek support on how to address such issues.

Exercise:

Next, please engage in an exercise which requires reflecting upon self in a challenging interchange with a child or youth.

Handout #5, "Self-Awareness Exercise," includes an example to assist participants to complete the exercise.

Please review the following instructions:

You will need a paper and pen or pencil to record some of your responses to the following:

1. Recall an experience or interchange you had with a child or youth in your care that was challenging and that, from your perspective, was not successful.

e.g., Ben hit Lucas when Lucas tried to take his toy away.

2. What you were thinking at the time? Feeling? Doing? Saying?

- Thoughts: They shouldn't hit each other. I need to do something to intervene.

- Feelings: Angry, scared, and uncomfortable with yelling.

- Actions/Words: I yelled at Ben and told him never to

hit others.

3. What beliefs are/were attached to these feelings, thoughts, and actions?
 - Hitting others is a hurtful way to show anger.
 - You should never hit anyone
 - Yelling is a hurtful way to communicate concern.
 - Yelling is not an effective way to communicate concern.
4. Where did these beliefs come from, i.e. from whom did you learn them and in what context?
 - I learned these beliefs as a result of my experience growing up in a home where parents used hitting and yelling as forms of punishment.
5. What impact do these beliefs or rules have on your caregiving relationships?
 - I feel an intense need to stop children from hitting each other and I become very anxious when they do hit each other.
6. Is it necessary to re-think these beliefs to be a more effective communicator, and, as a result, a more effective caregiver? If so how?
 - I need to find a way to help children learn ways of communicating their anger other than hitting, and I need to learn how to do this without yelling so that my beliefs are congruent.

New Beliefs:

- Teaching children how to communicate anger effectively will decrease the incidence of hitting.
 - I also need to explore and resolve my feelings of anger and fear in response to hitting so that it doesn't interfere with my caregiving relationships.
- 7.

This exercise may be challenging for some participants in terms of discerning the difference between feelings and thoughts and between thoughts and beliefs. The accuracy of defining these concepts is less important than the connection between past learnings and current behaviour and reactions.

The following questions may be used as a guide:

Questions for Discussion

1. What was your experience in doing this exercise?
2. What is an example of a belief or rule that you identified?
3. How did this belief or rule impact your communication and relationship with the child or youth?
4. Did you re-think this belief or rule and, if so, how?

The following are some examples of questions that the caregiver might ask himself while caring for children and youth.

When the child or youth first arrives in your home:

- “What is my reaction to this child’s placement in my home?”
- “Am I able to just be with this child and get to know him?”

While the child or youth is in your care:

- “What level of comfort do I have with involving the youth in decision making?”
- “How do I react to this youth’s anger about the loss of her family?”
- “What are my beliefs about sharing my own feelings?”

When the child or youth is about to leave your home:

- “How do I feel about losses?”
- “Do I allow the youth to express his feelings about the transition?”

Summary Remarks:

Self-awareness is vital to the development of effective relationships. Becoming consciously aware of the impact of experiences on one’s ability to respond to children, youth, families, and other members of the care team enables caregivers to make more conscious decisions about how to communicate effectively. In some cases, it may be necessary for

the caregiver to get support and work through issues that are triggered and, in others, the caregiver may be able to set their experiences aside and continue to respond effectively to the child or youth.

4. COMMUNICATION SKILLS

(80 minutes)

Learning Outcome:

The caregiver can demonstrate, at an introductory level, the basic communication skills of attending and empathy. **Materials:**

Handouts

- Handout #6 Why Listening Works
- Handout #7 Common Mistakes Made in Listening
- Handout #8 Responding With Empathy - A Case Study
- Handout #9 Responding With Empathy – Exercise
- Handout #10 Empathic Responding Observation Guide

Overheads

- Overhead #6 Why Listening Works
- Overhead #7 Common Mistakes Made in Listening

In this part of the course; participants will have an opportunity to learn about, view, and practice two basic communication skills that are fundamental to effective communication and caregiving relationships: attending and empathy.

A. The Skill of Attending

Instructions:

Attending is a non-verbal skill that communicates to listeners that they are important and worth listening to. It is a prerequisite for listening and for developing a strong caregiving relationship. While physical posturing is the essence of attending, communicating a genuine interest in listening is

also important. The acronym S-O-L-E-R has been used to summarize the five components of this skill (Egan, 1997). Trainers should demonstrate this skill after describing the following:

- **S:** Face the child or youth **Squarely**. In other words position yourself in a way that communicates involvement, and says “I’m here with you.” (Note: Side-by-side may be more fitting).
- **O:** Adopt an **Open** posture. Crossed arms and legs can communicate defensiveness or a lack of involvement.
- **L:** At times it is possible to **Lean** forward toward the other person. In North American culture, leaning slightly forward toward a person is often seen as saying “I’m with you,” while leaning back can be a way of saying, “I’m bored” or, “I’m not really listening to you.” Leaning too far forward or doing so too soon may frighten a child.
- **E:** Maintaining **Eye** contact in North American culture is another way of saying, “I’m with you” or, “I’m interested.” One needs to be aware of cultural differences in terms of what different forms of eye contact communicate.
- **R:** Try to be **Relaxed** while attending. This includes breathing, not fidgeting nervously or making distracting facial expressions.

Summary Remarks:

The skill of attending is important to all relationships. It is very important to be flexible when using attending skills and to be mindful of the phase of the relationship; the child and youth, or family’s culture; the context; and any unique individual needs. For example, one of the environments in which youth seem to be the most comfortable talking is in the car while travelling. Of course, the caregiver in this context would need to modify her attending so that she could drive safely and still communicate interest in the youth. Think of how you might demonstrate attending in this context.

Think of other examples of times when attending skills need to be modified to suit cultural, contextual, relational, and individual differences (e.g. facing squarely, eye contact adjustments).

B. The Skill of Basic Empathy

This skill requires the accurate identification of expressed feelings and the listener's ability to respond to the feelings in a manner which genuinely and respectfully captures the experience of the speaker.

Instructions:

Prepare seven pages with the following headings (one heading at the top of each page) and post these around the room:

- Happy
- Sad
- Angry
- Scared
- Confused
- Strong
- Weak

Emotions or feelings play an important part in communication. To truly feel heard and understood, we all need a response to our feelings. Caring, trusting relationships are developed with children and youth as we hear and respond to their experience, especially their feelings. In addition, they learn how to more specifically label and communicate their feelings and how to identify feelings in others. For example, if a child tells us that she is "upset," it can be hard to know if she is feeling sad, angry, hurt, depressed, or lonely. By attending to the non-verbal aspect of her communication, we can make an informed guess and try to help the child identify her experience more specifically.

In North American culture, we typically leave out the emotions when responding to someone's message. Instead, we tend to focus almost exclusively on content, or we tend to ignore the experience of the other completely and start barraging them with questions or giving advice. Neither of these approaches is respectful nor helpful.

Exercise:

The next skill that we will be learning, basic empathy, requires an extensive vocabulary of words to describe feelings. Reflect on how many feeling words you can come up with for each category.

Keep in mind slang words and phrases that children and youth might use. When working with very young children, intellectually or literacy challenged persons, participants can use pictures to demonstrate the feelings, such as - for happy and /for sad.

Acknowledge the range of feeling words identified that can be used to express feelings and to respond with empathy.

Summary Remarks:

Acknowledge the range of feelings before moving on to the next piece "Responding with Empathy," where acknowledging another person's feelings will be the focus.

C. Responding With Empathy

To show understanding is:

- to know how another feels and what she is experiencing without having to feel the same way yourself.
 - to be able to place yourself in another person's position.
 - to be able to listen and infer accurately a person's feelings attitudes, beliefs, values, rules, etc., from what they are saying or doing, i.e. from the observable and the unobservable.
 - to communicate these observations , inferences, awareness's by attending and being genuine, respectful, and warm through your words and your body language.
 - to communicate verbally the feelings and content of their message.
 - to respond with empathy by reflecting back the child's or youth's feelings and the reasons for those feelings.
-

- to respond to the core message of what the child or youth is saying, both verbally and non-verbally.

Review Handout #6, "Why Listening Works," (Overhead #6, "Why Listening Works"). When empathy is exercised effectively, the child or youth experiences:

- that the caregiver truly understands him.
- a greater understanding and acceptance of himself. This is necessary before change can occur.
- a human connectedness based on mutual trust and caring.
- permission to share feelings, often ones that were previously denied, forgotten, or suppressed.

This skill is useful for all communication, whether with children or youth, adult workers, parents, or other family members.

This is the most important communication skill used throughout the caregiving process. Without it all other communication skills may be ineffective.

Present the following formula for responding

You feel _____ because _____ .

For example:

- You feel sad because your dog is sick.
- You feel disappointed because you did not get the grade you wanted on your paper.
- You feel excited because you are going to a party.

Exercise:

Recall a recent conversation you had with a child or youth in your care. Then offer a response that you may have given using the formula:

You feel _____ because _____ .

Participants will often not be absolutely sure of the child's or youth's feelings in which case they can change their tone to indicate a question or add "I wonder if you feel _____ because _____ ?"

Summary Remarks:

This is a simple formula for the purposes of learning and practicing and that there are other ways to encourage responses. Some examples of these are in your reading package along with further description and information about the skill of empathy.

Briefly review Handout #7, "Common Mistakes Made in Listening," and Overhead #7, "Common Mistakes made in Listening," with participants, using examples from your or participants' experience.

Exercise #1**Instructions:**

Ask participants to go to Handout #8, "Responding With Empathy - A Case Study," and complete the second part of the exercise.

Summary Remarks:

This is an introduction to communication skills, particularly to the skills of attending and empathy. Further development of these and other communication skills through continued training and practice would be valuable for all caregivers. It is important to make a commitment to ongoing self-awareness and development. This process can be facilitated through journal writing, counseling, forming support groups, or talking with friends and family they trust. Self-awareness and effective communication skills are the foundation for effective and satisfying personal and professional relationships.

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