



Couple Communication

Lesson Plan

Objectives:

1. Participants will learn effective communication strategies.
2. Participants will learn how positive and effective communication affects their children.
3. Participants will commit to improving their communication skills.
4. Participants will create goals for improving their communication.
5. Participants will develop an action plan for improving their communication.
6. Participants will access community resources to help them improve their communication skills.

Materials:

- DVD — Everybody Hates Chris, Season 1, Disc 2, “Everybody Hates Christmas,” (6:07-6:44); The Cosby Show, Season 1, Disc 3, Episode 21, “The Younger Woman,” (17:34-21:16).
- DVD player and a television or a computer with DVD drive and a projector
- SPEAK/HEAR Skills (handout for facilitators)
- (For Optional Activity) Back-To-Back Drawing Activity pages (5 different designs)
- Participant binder pockets with handouts:
 - Keeping the Peace Quiz handout
 - SPEAK/HEAR Skills handout
 - Setting Goals for Communication worksheet
 - Resource list for your area (see Preparation note #1)
- SPEAK/HEAR skills cards
- Flip chart, dry erase board, etc.
- Blank paper
- Pens
- Attendance sheet
- Name tags
- Materials for participant tables:
 - Play dough
 - Pipe cleaners
 - Paper and markers, etc.
- Participant incentives

Session Overview:

Welcome and introductions	(10-15 minutes)
Watch video clips and discuss	(10 minutes)
Discussion: Importance of learning communication skills	(2 minutes)
Activity: Keeping the Peace Quiz	(10 minutes)
Discussion: Introduce speaking and listening skills	(1 minute)
Discussion: Speaking skills	(15 minutes)
Optional Activity: Drawing back-to-back	(5 minutes)
Discussion: Listening skills	(10 minutes)
Discussion and role play: How the skills work together	(10 minutes)
Talking about it: Practice using SPEAK/HEAR skills	(15 minutes)
Activity: Create goals and an action plan	(10 minutes)
Review SPEAK/HEAR worksheet	(5 minutes)
Resources in the community	(1 minute)
Introduce take home activity	(1 minute)
Wrap-Up	(10 minutes)

<i>Session total</i>	<i>(2 hours)</i>
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Preparation:

1. Create a list of resources for your area related to this topic. Include this list in participant packets.
2. This lesson focuses on communication in couple relationships. If you are working with participants that are not currently in a relationship, remind them that even though they are not in a relationship now, they may be in the future. Some of the information in this lesson may not seem to apply to them at this time, but it is important information for future relationships.
3. As you prepare, think about personal stories that you can share with participants throughout the lesson.

Procedure:**1. Welcome participants to the session (10-15 minutes).**

- Introduce yourself to the group and the title of today's lesson, "Couple Communication."
- Welcome everyone to the session and, especially if you have new participants, have participants briefly introduce themselves.
- Ask about the take home activity from the previous session (if applicable).

Say: *"Today we are going to talk about communication skills that will help you more effectively, and respectfully communicate with your partner and others. A lot of our discussion will focus on couples, but even if you are not currently in a relationship you probably will be again someday, so it will still be helpful to you."*

2. Watch video clips and discuss (10 minutes total for clips and discussion).

Say: *"First we are going to watch a few different clips that model different types of communication."*

- Tell participants to think about how the family members in the clips are communicating.
- Show a clip from the Everybody Hates Chris episode titled, "Everybody Hates Christmas," (6:07-6:44); and a clip from The Cosby Show episode titled, "The Younger Woman," (17:34-21:16).
- After each clip, ask the questions below.

Ask: *"In what ways did this family communicate in a positive way?" "What would you do differently?"*

3. Discussion: The importance of learning communication skills (2 minutes).

Say: *"To build and maintain a happy, healthy couple relationship, it's important to work on building strong communication skills. Today we are going to talk about communication skills that will help you and your partner talk more effectively and positively. Partners that have great communication skills can work through most challenges."*

Ask: “Do you ever feel like you can’t solve a problem because you’re not sure how to talk about it?” “How might your children benefit if they see you solve problems without yelling?”

Say: “Many parents argue with each other instead of focusing on solving the problem. Children raised in high conflict homes don’t do as well as children raised in homes where there is low conflict. For example, children who see or hear their parents argue tend to be more aggressive, and they yell and hit more than other kids. Sometimes these kids also become depressed and they may be less likely to talk about their feelings with others.

Children learn a lot from the adults in their lives. They benefit when their parents solve problems peacefully. **If parents solve problems without yelling, children are more likely to use positive communication skills themselves.**”

4. Activity: Keeping the Peace Quiz (10 minutes).

- Have participants get the “Keeping the Peace Quiz” out of their packets.
- There are a few options for this activity. You may read the questions aloud and have participants mark their answers as you read through the choices. Another option would be to have participants work in small groups to answer the questions.
- After everyone is finished, read the scoring section at the bottom of the quiz.

Ask: “What were some of the scenarios you could identify with?” “Were you surprised at all by your score?”

5. Discussion: Introduce the speaking and listening skills (1 minute).

Say: “Today we are going to talk about a set of speaking and listening skills that will help you to have clearer, more successful communication with your partner. **The speaking skills come from the word ‘speak’ because you are speaking your point of view. The listening skills come from the word ‘hear’ because you are also trying to hear what your partner is saying.** If you have previously attended a retreat, you may know the speaking skills as ‘Expression Skill’ and listening skills as ‘Showing Understanding Skill.’”

- Distribute the SPEAK/HEAR skills cards, one to each couple or participant.
- Tell participants that there is a handout in their packets describing each of the SPEAK/HEAR skills in more detail.
- The handout has blank spaces participants can fill in as you go through each skill.

6. Discussion: Speaking Skills (15 minutes total).

Say: *“First we are going to talk about communication skills for the person who is speaking.”*

Note: Write out the word “speak” vertically on flip chart paper, an overhead, etc. Then write out each phrase as you explain.

Speaking Skill 1: (S)tart with a positive.

Say: *“The first key to good communication when you are the speaker is to start with something positive. The goal of these skills, and starting with a positive in particular, is to help us identify the need. **If our needs are not being met, then we may have conflict. (Note that conflict is a normal part of every relationship and that it’s how you deal with conflict that’s important). It’s easy to recognize our feelings when we are mad or frustrated, but sometimes it is not as easy to tell others what we need.** For example, you may be mad that your partner is coming home late. You are angry because you want to spend more time with your partner and that need is not being met.”*

Ask: *“If you are concerned that your partner is coming home late, **how can you express this concern to your partner by first stating something positive?**”*

Say: *“What is positive about your concern is that you care about your partner and want to spend time with him or her. You want your partner to know that you are concerned about having enough time to spend together both as a couple and as a family. **By starting with a positive, you are letting your partner know that you are not attacking him or her, but you are expressing your needs.**”*

Another example:

“Your partner brings home a nice dinner, which is a very nice thought, but you don’t think that you have the money to spend on it right now.”

Ask: *“How can you express your concern by starting with a positive?”*

Sample response:

“I appreciate that you want to help out and get dinner for us, but I worry that we don’t have the money to spend on this right now.”

Say: *“Being positive isn’t always easy, especially when we are dealing with everyday struggles, but research shows that being positive is important for developing happy, long-lasting couple relationships. Researchers have found that **long-lasting relationships have 5 positive interactions between partners for every 1 negative interaction.** If you have 5 times as many positive interactions as negative, your relationship is more likely to last.*

***Researchers also say that really good and happy relationships have 20 positive interactions for every negative interaction.** You can have a long lasting relationship if you have 5 positive interactions in your relationship for every 1 negative interaction, but really good and happy relationships tend to have an even greater number of positive compared to negative interactions.”*

Ask: *“What are some positive interactions you can have with your partner?”*

Sample responses:

- Sharing joy
- Humor
- Showing interest
- Giving flowers
- A good morning back rub
- Saying how nice your partner looks

Ask: *“What are some negative interactions?”*

Sample responses:

- Anger
- Defensiveness
- Disgust
- Criticism

Speaking Skill 2: (P)ay attention to what you say and how you say it.

Ask: *“Do you ever say something in the heat of the moment that maybe you wished later you could have taken back?”*

Say: *“The next speaking skill is about paying attention to what you say and how you say it. **This includes the words that you say, the tone of voice you use, and your body language.** Set up the discussion so that it is not a win-lose situation. Talk with your partner without judging him or her.”*

Ask: *“If you come home from work really tired and just want to rest, but as soon as you sit down, your baby starts crying, how might you tell your partner that you want him or her to help out?”*

Say: *“**What’s going to make your partner feel like helping with the baby?** If you touch your partner gently and say how helpful it would be if he or she would take care of the baby this time, or if you made a rude comment about how you always have to take care of the baby right after a long day at work? This relates to keeping your interactions more positive than negative. Your partner probably will not listen to you if you yell or make rude comments. He or she may become defensive instead.”*

Speaking Skill 3: (E)xplain how you feel, using details.

Say: *“The third speaking skill is to talk about how you feel, being specific and using details. When you are speaking, share how something makes you feel. If you do not like how your partner shows affection to his or her ex, tell your partner how that makes you feel. You might give an example of a time recently when this occurred. **When explaining your feelings, start with an ‘I’ statement.**”*

Ask: *“Does anyone know what an ‘I’ statement is?”*

Note: You may want to write the components of an “I” statement on flip chart paper or dry erase board.

Say: *“When you use an ‘I’ statement, you emphasize how you feel without placing blame on someone else. You take charge of your own feelings.*

In an ‘I’ statement, you:

- 1) **Name the specific behavior that concerns you** (when your partner shows affection toward his ex), and
- 2) **Name how that behavior makes you feel** (angry, frustrated, sad, hurt, etc.).”
- 3) **Tell your partner what you would like to have happen next time you are in that situation.**

An example: *“I feel left out and hurt when you give her a hug and don’t acknowledge that I am there. Next time I would like it if you would not give a hug and pay attention to me, too.”*

- Practice “I” Statements. Give participants a few minutes to practice using “I” statements.

Say: *“Take a few minutes to practice using ‘I’ statements with your partner or another participant. You can use something that happened recently, but be sure it is something you can talk about without arguing.”*

Note: If necessary, help participants think of something neutral or positive that they can use to practice “I” statements.

Speaking Skill 4: (A)void trigger words, like always and never.

Say: *“When using speaking skills, it is also important to avoid trigger words, such as ‘always’ and ‘never.’”*

Ask: *“What do you think makes these words trigger words?”*

Say: *“Trigger words are **words that can quickly turn a conversation into a fight.** Sometimes they are called ‘fighting words.’”*

Ask: *“If your partner tells you that you ‘never’ spend time with him or her, or that you ‘always’ leave your dishes in the sink, how does that make you feel?”*

Say: *“When someone says these things to us, it can make us become defensive. We may stop focusing on the problem and start arguing about who’s right or who’s wrong. **Everyone has a set of trigger words** that bother us. There may be certain words or certain issues that make you become defensive and can quickly lead to an argument. It may be something like ‘You’re a bad parent’ or ‘That’s not how I would do that.’”*

Ask: *“What are some things your partner can do or say that is likely to lead to an argument?”*

Say: *“Couples in healthy relationships know these words and work to avoid them. They do not use them as ammunition for a fight.”*

Speaking Skill 5: (K)eep it brief, then give your partner a chance to paraphrase.

Say: *“The last speaking skill we are going to talk about is keeping it brief, and giving your partner a chance to paraphrase. In a skilled conversation, you plan what you want to say then share your thoughts and feelings. Your partner then repeats what you said in his or her own words. This helps you know that he or she heard and understood what you said. If there were any misunderstandings, then restate your feelings and have your partner repeat them back to you again.”*

Once you are finished sharing your feelings and your partner has repeated what you said, it is your partner's turn to share his or her feelings. After your partner shares, you will have a chance to repeat back to your partner what you heard him or her say."

7. **Optional Activity: Back-to-Back Drawing** (5 minutes).

- Have participants sit back-to-back with a partner.
- If couples are present, have them work together.
- Give one partner a blank piece of paper and a pen or pencil, and give the other participant a Back-to-Back Drawing Activity page.
- The person who has the page with shapes describes what is on the page in enough detail so that the person with the blank sheet of paper can re-create the shapes.
- Allow participants to decide what specifics to give, but an example might be, "There is a triangle halfway down the page with sides that are about 2 inches long."
- After participants are finished, have each share their drawings.

Ask: *"How did you do?" "How did it feel giving the directions?" "How did it feel listening to the directions?" "How can this activity relate to communication in relationships?"*

8. **Discussion: Listening Skills** (10 minutes total).

- Go through each of the listening skills, also listed on the SPEAK/HEAR skills card.

Ask: *"What's the difference between listening and hearing?"*

Say: *"When we hear, we simply hear the sounds and the words. Hearing does not require any thought. When we truly listen, we pay attention and try to understand what others are saying. Although we are using the word 'hear,' we really want you to 'listen' and try to understand your partner.*

Next we are going to talk about some skills for listening to your partner. The speaking skills only work if the listener is really hearing what the speaker is saying. Listening skills come from the word 'HEAR.'"

Note: Write out the word “hear” vertically on flip chart paper, an overhead, etc. Then write out each phrase as you explain.

Listening Skill 1: (H)onor your partner’s thoughts and feelings.

Say: *“The first listening skill is to honor your partner’s thoughts and feelings.”*

Ask: *“What does it mean to ‘honor’ your partner?”*

Say: *“Honoring your partner is about **making your partner feel valued and showing respect for his or her thoughts and feelings**. Show your partner that you value him or her by listening and focusing on what your partner is saying, not what you want to say next. We don’t use the word honor in our society very often, but it is a very important characteristic of a happy, healthy couple relationship.”*

Listening Skill 2: (E)mpathize: Put yourself in your partner’s shoes.

Say: *“Showing empathy is about putting yourself in your partner’s shoes and identifying with or experiencing your partner’s feelings as if they were your own.”*

Let’s pretend that it’s your partner’s turn to clean the house but he or she is not feeling well.”

Ask: *“How could you show empathy?”*

“If you were not feeling well, how would it feel if your partner helped out so that you could rest?”

Say: *“Empathizing with your partner means that you **recognize your partner’s feelings**, you **can imagine how your partner might be feeling**, and you **respect your partner’s feelings as being real and valid**.”*

Listening Skill 3: (A)llow a difference of opinion.

Say: *“The next HEAR skill is to allow your partner to speak his or her side of the issue and to have a different opinion than your own.”*

*Without different opinions, there wouldn't be a fight, right? This means that as the listener, **your job is only to listen to what your partner is saying and to repeat back what you hear, not to judge** what is being said or to share how you feel.*

This is not easy because it is not what we are trained to do. It may be difficult to just open yourself up to hearing your partner and not sharing your own opinion, but it is a skill that is a part of having successful communication. When it is your turn to speak, tell your partner what feelings or concerns you heard him or her express.”

Listening Skill 4: (R)epat respectfully.

Say: *“The last HEAR skill is to repeat respectfully. We have already talked some about this today in discussing how the speaker gives his or her partner a chance to paraphrase. **After your partner is done expressing his or her feelings, repeat what your partner said as closely to what you heard as possible.** You don't have to use the exact words that your partner used, but try your best to repeat back what your partner just shared with you. Sometimes during a conversation, people are so focused on thinking about what they want to say next and they don't really listen to their partner. By repeating your partner's words, you are focusing on listening to what he or she is saying. Sometimes we don't fully understand what our partners are feeling, and we need to allow them to correct us.”*

Give some examples:

Say: *“If our daughter is crying and I say, ‘You are so great with her. I'm really tired right now and I would appreciate if you could check on her this time,’ you might paraphrase that by saying, ‘You think I take good care of our daughter and you would appreciate if I could check on her this time because you are feeling really tired.’*

Here is one more example, if I say, ‘I worry about your safety when you stay out later than I expect.’”

Ask: *“How would you paraphrase (or tell me in your words) what I said?”*

Sample response:

- “You care about me and worry if I’m safe when I stay out late.”

9. Discussion and role play: How the skills work together (10 minutes).

- Before the role play, make a few more notes about the speaking and listening skills:

Say: *“Make sure that you take turns being the speaker and the listener when you are discussing.*

Also, pick a time and a place to have a conversation, especially if it is about an issue that you and your partner fight about a lot. Sometimes it is better to wait to have discussions that might be difficult, because then you can both think about what you want to say. When you are talking about an issue, take your time to share your feelings and to repeat your partner’s feelings.

Don’t rush into trying to solve the problem before each person has had a chance to share his or her feelings and feels as though he or she has been heard. It may take some time going back and forth. Some of this might feel uncomfortable and unnatural, but it helps you to get into the habit of speaking your point of view in a way that is respectful to your partner and respectfully listening to your partner’s point of view.

These skills can be used every day, but they are especially important when you are trying to solve a problem.”

- Have two participants role play using the speaking and listening skills.

Say: *“The speaking and listening skills work together to help you and your partner have an effective and respectful conversation. To see how the Speak and Hear skills work together, I would like to have two volunteers to role play the skills.”*

- **Ask for two volunteers.** Have them sit face to face, so that the entire group can see them.
- Ask them to discuss a neutral topic, such as what they did yesterday. If you use a neutral topic, it will help participants focus on practicing the skills, rather than thinking about the details of an important issue.

Say: *“When one partner starts off the conversation, he or she is the first speaker and should follow the ‘SPEAK’ skills listed on your card. The **speaker expresses his or her thoughts, feelings, or concerns** to the listener. After the speaker shares his or her thoughts, feelings, or concerns, the listener **shows that he or she understood** by repeating what the speaker said, using the ‘HEAR’ skills listed on the card. **Only after the speaker has shared and feels heard can the listener begin to share his or her thoughts, feelings, and concerns.**”*

10. Talking about it: Practice using SPEAK/HEAR skills (15 minutes: 10 minutes for practice, 5 minutes to discuss the activity).

- Have participants practice using the SPEAK/HEAR skills while discussing a real issue. Ask them to think of a relatively minor issue that will not bring intense feelings.
- Give participants about 10 minutes to discuss, using the skills, and go around to each pair to check that they are using the skills correctly.
- Have participants share their experiences using the SPEAK/HEAR skills during their discussion.

Ask: *“How well were you able to stick to the skills?”*

“Did you feel like you were able to tell your partner how you feel, while being respectful to your partner? Why or why not?”

“Did you feel like you were heard and understood? Why or why not?”

11. Review the SPEAK/HEAR Skills handout (5 minutes).

- Go through the “SPEAK/HEAR Skills” handout to see if participants were able to fill in the blanks correctly.
- You may want to give some incentive (i.e. candy or other small give-away) for those who have all blanks filled in correctly.

12. Activity: Create goals and an action plan for improving your communication (10 minutes).

- Refer participants to the “Setting Goals for Communication” worksheet in their packets.
- Have participants spend a few minutes creating at least three goals for improving their communication. These goals may be to use the

SPEAK/HEAR skills, to limit certain negative behaviors, to increase certain positive behaviors, etc.

- Have participants create an action plan for what they plan to do to make sure they meet their goals.

13. Resources in the community (1 minute).

- Tell participants that they can call ParentLink's WarmLine for questions about the SPEAK/HEAR skills or about any other lesson.

14. Introduce take home activity (1 minute).

 **Say:** *"Use the SPEAK/HEAR skills with your partner and try to use more positives in your everyday life. Work towards the communication goals you created today and let us know next time about your progress toward those goals."*

15. Wrap up the session and give out incentives (10 minutes).

- Ask if anyone has any general questions.
- Thank participants for coming and participating in the lesson.
- Make sure everyone knows the day and location of the next session.

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