



# Strategies for Developing Effective Communication Skills as a Leader

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Early childhood education is a relationship-based practice, and communication is crucial—both within the learning setting and outside of it. NAEYC’s early learning standards stress the importance of consistent written and oral communication between preschool leaders and teachers as well as between programs and families. Whether you lead a classroom or program, effective communication helps build supportive relationships and is a skill that can be developed and honed with ongoing practice.

As past director of the NAEYC-accredited Beachwood Nursery School in Beachwood, New Jersey, I shared policies, ideas, and program information with teachers and families. To sharpen my skills, I developed a “who, what, when, and how” approach. This article outlines some strategies to help you become a more effective communicator—no matter what role you play.

## Who Is Your Audience?

Think of all the groups you talk to daily: coworkers, families, children, board members, community representatives—the list is long and varied. How and what you communicate depends on your audience.

Yet sometimes when we write a message or speak, we forget who our audience is. We may give too much information—or not enough. For example, it’s easy to move off-topic during family-educator conferences. I always encouraged my staff to establish talking points ahead of time and to stay organized by focusing on children’s portfolio samples, assessment reports, and at-home resources.

When communicating, we should strive for clear, consistent communication that is tailored to our specific audience.

Questions to ask include

- › Who will be reading or listening to this?
- › Is the information useful to that audience?
- › Am I communicating to a group or an individual?

Whether you're a classroom teacher or administrator, focusing on the "who" of your message will help you communicate accurately and succinctly.



## What Do You Need to Say?

Next, examine what you need to communicate. General information? Safety policies and procedures? Information about child development or developmentally appropriate practice? What is the intention of the message you're presenting, and how can you communicate it clearly and concisely?

For example, I informed staff of pertinent deadlines and program events during our monthly meetings. This is also when we discussed program policies and procedures. Conversely, during planning meetings, lead teachers focused on curriculum content and shared ideas with one another. These gatherings were smaller, so they provided an opportunity for more discussion and collaboration among the teaching staff.

As a classroom teacher, it's essential to communicate with colleagues, coteachers, and support staff so you can continue building relationships. Communicating with your teaching team provides the opportunity to discuss expectations for routines, behavior management strategies, and curriculum content. To keep families feeling more connected to your program, strive to share information about program events and schedules and about child development. You can also connect families to local resources. (See "Tips for Effective Communication with Families" on this page for more ideas.)

## Tips for Effective Communication with Families

When communicating with families, it's important to be clear and concise. This is particularly true when sending anything in writing. The following guidelines from [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov) help make communication clear in English and support effective translations into other languages.

- Use short sentences.
- Use words the reader will know ("reading" and "writing" tend to be more familiar than "literacy").
- Use clear verbs and active voice.
- Avoid slang or sayings that don't directly state your meaning.
- Use images that add meaning to the message.
- Use a positive tone that is not punitive or condescending.
- Use bullet points, lists, and headings to guide the reader.

It's also important to ensure that communication is free of any bias. Toward that end, strive to

- use person-first language ("child with a disability" rather than "handicapped child")
- avoid using slang or nicknames
- use gender-neutral language
- treat everyone with respect
- listen patiently
- consider using a translator, translation app, or phone translation service if language is a barrier

From NAEYC's *Families and Educators Together: Building Great Relationships that Support Young Children*, by Derry Koralek, Karen Nemeth, and Kelly Ramsey.

## When Are You Communicating?

Communication is an ongoing process and can be divided into daily, monthly, quarterly, and annual timeframes. For example, program leaders and teachers should communicate with families daily—during drop-off and pickup times or during designated office hours. Written communication can include a sheet indicating the centers a child visited during the day or a child's diapering, feeding, and napping schedules.

The teachers at my program also sent weekly updates, and I communicated with families via a monthly newsletter.

Also consider surveying your families to see how they perceive your program and how well you're meeting their needs. Periodic surveys will help you reflect on your program practices and show how you value communication.

Timeliness is an important consideration. Have you provided enough lead time when advertising family events? Have you given ample time for staff meetings or for family-educator conferences? Setting up a timeframe for daily, weekly, and monthly communication avoids haphazardness and fosters effective communication with both staff and families.



## How Do You Communicate?

We live in a digital age. No longer dependent on snail mail, our audience can receive information instantly with the use of email, text messaging, and social media. It's up to us to determine the best ways to consistently share information.

I found in-person meetings with staff to be an effective platform. Monthly all-staff meetings and monthly planning meetings with lead teachers foster relationships and allow programs to grow. Emails and text messaging also help keep staff members in the know. Remember, though, that not all communication needs to be formal: taking a moment at the end of the day to reflect with your teaching team is a valuable part of communication and can help build relationships.

Visibility is another important piece in how you communicate—whether you're a teacher or program leader. Do you greet coworkers and families in the morning? Are you visible during drop-off and pickup times? How do you greet the children in your program? Our willingness to be with others, even if it's a simple greeting upon arrival, sets the tone for the environment in which we lead.

## Final Thoughts

Viewing communication through a “who, what, when, and how” lens offers a framework for us to share information. If communication isn't your strong suit, these strategies will help you identify the information you want to communicate and set the foundations and expectations for your programs and classrooms. Effective communication is an essential element to our work in the field of early childhood education. After all, we are a relationship-based profession.

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This article supports the following NAEYC Early Learning Programs standards and topics

**Standard 6: Staff Competencies, Preparation, and Support**

6B: Professional Identity and Recognition

6D: Ongoing Professional Development

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