



The Cornell Research Program  
on *Self-Injury and Recovery*

## Positive Communication Strategies

by Janis Whitlock &  
Mandy Purington

Enhancing your ability to talk and listen to your child is not only important for recovery, but it is also a valuable skill set to further develop for all of your interactions with your child. But, as we all know, having an honest and open talk with someone, particularly when the topic is sensitive, can be very difficult. Choose a **time and place** appropriate for the conversation. Being in a quiet place without interruptions or distractions and having plenty of time for the discussion helps increase the chances your child will be open to sharing and listening.

**Active listening** is an important component of positive communication. Actively listening means you are giving full attention to the person you are communicating with, making eye contact, and not doing anything else (even if it doesn't seem like it could be a distraction). After listening to what was said, you can comment or ask questions about what you just heard to be sure you clearly understood. It helps to be specific about the situation even when the person speaking is making global statements (e.g. using words like "never" or "always"). This kind of reflective listening helps your child feel heard and helps you understand his or her message. Asking questions can also keep the conversation going.

### *An example of active listening:*

*Daughter:* "You never listen to me! I told you where I was and it wasn't my fault that I was late coming home -- it was Kara's fault because she couldn't find her keys. You never trust me and always think I am doing bad things when I am not!"

*Parent:* "I hear you saying that you feel like I did not really hear or trust you when you told me that you were trying to come home on time but that you could not do much to help Kara find her keys. This made you feel a little powerless and stuck. Is this what you were feeling?"

*Daughter:* "Yeah, I guess so. But you always do that."

*Parent:* "I don't know about always, but I can see that I wasn't listening very well here. I was feeling frustrated that you were not home on time and I wanted to go to sleep and know that you were home safely. I really wish that you had called me when Kara realized that she lost her keys and you could see you were going to be late. I felt angry and tired and worried. This makes it hard for me to listen. I promise to work on this. Do you think you can also work on understanding what I might be feeling in these situations too?"

From here the conversation could go many directions, but the parent has effectively diffused the tension and has opened the door for honest connection. By admitting that he did not listen and sharing his feelings, the parent has not let his child off the hook for being late. He has instead modeled both positive coping and communication and opened the door for authentic sharing.

Other **nonverbal** characteristics of communication are important, too. Things like positive tone, sustained eye contact, and facial expressions show you are listening and engaged in

# Positive Communication Strategies

continued  
page 2 of 2

the conversation with your child. Using positive, open gestures (e.g. leaning forward and nodding) rather than negative ones (e.g. crossing your arms or putting your hands on your hips), suggest you are listening and open to the conversation. Although this is not always possible when you are feeling negative emotions (and this is okay, too – you are human after all!), it is a good skill to actively work on and model.

### **When in conflict, try to become aware of whether you want to win or to understand.**

It is normal to want to maintain or exert control, particularly when we feel out of control of other big things in life, like our child's behaviors or feelings. However, it is also important and useful to let go of winning and instead work to understand both your *and* your child's feelings and perceptions. Allow your child to have a **different point of view** from your own – you are trying to engage your child in conversation, not “win” the debate. Not only does this facilitate positive communication, it helps you both understand each other's feelings and perspectives in potentially triggering situations. This strategy opens the door to ongoing conversation and can make your child more willing to talk with you in the future, even about difficult topics.

When you are in the midst of a difficult or frustrating conversation, try to **be responsive, not reactive**. Keep in mind **you can always come back** to difficult conversations, even if you feel you didn't handle it the way you wanted to the first time. Allow the same for your child. If things are becoming uncomfortable or either of you are feeling overwhelmed, say how you are feeling and suggest you continue the conversation at another time. If a difficult conversation ends poorly, give yourself and your child permission to raise the discussion another time. You can acknowledge that you wish you had responded differently as a way of opening the conversation. Many parents wish the first conversation with their child about self-injury had gone differently. Understand that – though it may sometimes feel like it – the door has *not* closed on this conversation. Acknowledging that you felt it didn't go well can let your child know you want to talk more about it and that you are working to make future conversations more positive.

There may be **alternatives** to a lengthy face-to-face conversation, especially on topics you or your child find sensitive. Maybe you can more easily communicate via texts, written notes left for each other, or in emails. Sometimes talking in the car – where eye contact is not an expectation – can be a good place for a conversation. Although this removes the possibility for eye contact (one of the characteristics of active listening), talking in the car might actually be easier when discussing sensitive or embarrassing topics. A series of short conversations spread out over days or weeks might work better than one long discussion. There is no one “right way” to communicate – use the method that works best for you.

Further developing and practicing positive communication strategies can take some work – especially when a difficult conversation makes emotions run high; however, taking the time to develop these skills can improve the quality of your communications, make future conversations less difficult, and encourage your child to talk with you even about tough topics.

### **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Whitlock, J. & Purington, M. (2013). *Positive communication strategies*. The Practical Matters series, Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. Cornell University. Ithaca, NY

**FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE SEE: [www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu](http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu)**