

## Integrity in Communication

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit [www.kidpower.org](http://www.kidpower.org).

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I have seen too many important relationships damaged and destroyed simply because the parties involved complained to others instead of bringing themselves to speak directly to each other or to someone who had the power to help them. Lack of integrity in communication can result in heartbreak and vast amounts of wasted energy in families, organizations, schools, businesses, and communities. This is why it is important to make the time to think about **how** we are communicating as well as **what** we are wanting to accomplish.

Maintaining integrity in communication is an easy commitment to make theoretically, but hard to sustain in real life. Many aspects of the larger social culture we live in do **not** foster honesty, direct respectful communication, getting help to solve problems, being tolerant of differences, or being proactive in addressing concerns.

Our larger social culture often teaches people to blame rather than to seek win-win solutions and tends to define feedback as an attack rather than as a gift. Our larger social culture often encourages negative judgments about intentions rather than using objective observations of behavior that, when clear boundaries or expectations are defined, can usually be changed.

Many societies will define "different" as being annoying at best or evil at worst. However, some of the most wonderful people I know have been an acquired taste who took some getting used to. Often, the best path to getting over being bothered by differences is to talk about ones uncomfotableness very directly in a way that is both respectful and honest. Also, differing needs and expectations in any relationship, short or long, require acknowledgment in order to find mutually acceptable solutions.

The models most of us have grown up with are far more often of people complaining about others rather explaining to those others what the problems are or, if unsure about how to do this respectfully, getting help and perspective in order to fix those problems for the future.

Doing something differently than our larger social culture means that we are swimming against the current and pulling against gravity. This means that we have to work hard as individuals and as a team to find ways

to create and sustain a healthy positive culture within Kidpower and other groups that are important to us.

When people get upset, it is normal for communication to get distorted. Often, upset people selectively hear and magnify the negatives, tell themselves bad stories about the intentions of other people, and forget about the positives. Negative perceptions that are not dealt with tend to build up and create a very broadly negative perception of an experience or a relationship that is often not justified by an objective assessment of what actually happened.

I have done this myself at times even though I know better, and other people have done it to me, even though they also know better. I try to remind myself that it is normal for people to perceive experiences or interactions differently and that the miracle is that any of us ever understand each other.

Unresolved negative feelings and unspoken feedback can build up and block what has been important and good in an experience or a relationship, much like a heavy mist might build up and block the warmth and light from the sun.

In any important relationship, miscommunications and mistakes are very likely to happen between people. What is important is **how** we work these problems out. Instead of having problems end up damaging relationships and trust, these can become opportunities to learn and grow from each other.

If we truly value honesty, safety, and fairness, upholding these values requires that we find ways to express our concerns to people who are in a position to do something to resolve them, rather than just complaining about others behind their backs, making jokes that are actually disguised complaints, or carrying unresolved negative feelings inside of ourselves that are apt to leak out in a potentially harmful way sooner or later.

The tools Kidpower teaches include direct communication about behavior that crosses our boundaries, specific respectful feedback, persistence in dealing with any negative reactions rather than being stopped by them, speaking up about our needs, giving people the benefit of the doubt about their intentions, staying mindful about what is actually happening, and getting help when we need it.

Using these tools takes skill and courage because it can be hard to give feedback in the moment, especially to people who are in positions of authority, respect, and power - or to people who seem to be vulnerable and potentially easy to hurt.

It is totally appropriate to seek help in giving feedback, but too often an individual will relieve his or her feelings by ventilating to someone else, ask the person to keep these feelings confidential so that he or she can deal with the problem directly, and then not deal with it. This is normal, but it does not create a healthy family, organization, or community. Remember, individual emotional safety and group integrity are more important than **anyone's** embarrassment, inconvenience, or offense.

One potential solution is to ask everyone within a group to commit to not keeping secrets about potential problems or issues that might impact anyone's credibility or effectiveness. Instead of agreeing to confidentiality about problems (and unresolved negative feelings and critical feedback that have not been shared directly **are** problems), the person being complained to can say, "I will be glad to support you in talking about this with the people who can help to solve the problem. However, we have a commitment not to keep problems a secret, so I am also going to need to tell this person (or this person's supervisor) directly."

Although most people will agree that speaking up directly is important, we often find this hard to do. Here are some common reasons people give for **not** speaking up - and the common actual results:

- *"It was too trivial"* - so instead of fixing it, I undermined the credibility of someone else by discussing my annoyance with others.
- *"I fixed it myself"* - but I didn't give the feedback in a way that would help this person change the behavior and I was still unresolved enough to think less of this person.
- *"I was too tired"* - but I was not too tired to complain later, in a way that diminishes credibility and trust.
- *"I thought you knew. You were looking right at me. I heard you say something about it"* - but I was still so unresolved that I complained to others and you didn't get to know that this was bothering me, which might have helped you to fix it. (Note: Just because someone is looking at you does not mean that the person actually sees and understands what is happening.)
- *"I thought this person wasn't open to hearing my feedback"* - so instead I will make an assumption that is an attack on this person's intentions and integrity.
- *"It was just for a little while. I won't be seeing these people again soon"* - but I deprived this person or the person in charge of the chance to fix the situation and took my negativity home with me."
- *"It wasn't my place to say something"* - so I will believe that this person doesn't care and repeat my concern to others instead.
- *"It wasn't important. I let it go"* - but I **did** carry a negative feeling about this person/situation and I **did** tell others, so maybe I did not **really** let it go.
- *"You seemed too busy and I didn't want to bother you"* - so I will bother you more by not giving you the chance to fix the problem sooner rather than later.
- *"I was waiting for the right moment"* - but the moment never came so I stayed upset and everything got bigger in my mind.
- *"I was afraid you would think badly of me"* - so instead I am continuing to think badly of you and/or of someone else.
- *"I was too caught up in what was going on at the time to realize how I was really feeling. I didn't know that I was unhappy until much later and then it seemed like it was too late"* - but it was not too late for me to continue to be unhappy to the point that I lost track of many of the things I felt good about.
- *"I felt embarrassed about being upset"* - but I **am** upset and the longer I wait, the more upset I seem to feel.
- *"No one else seems to be bothered about this. I don't want to look like an idiot"* - so I will ignore that fact that people are different and that it is okay for me to be different and no one can learn from me if I don't speak up.
- *"These people are experts. I don't feel as if I know enough to speak up"* - so I will feel bad and not fix it, even though I also know that experts are also people who are not perfect.
- *"I wanted to discuss this face-to-face"* - but I can't since we are far apart so I will let this fester and deprive this person of information instead of using the telephone.
- *"I tried to tell this person, but got a negative reaction"* - So I gave up instead of persisting or getting help, even though I know that giving up on communication has the potential to be destructive.

In our programs, we encourage parents and other caring adults to ask children from time to time, "Is there anything you have been wondering or worrying about that you haven't told me?" This is because it is **normal** to resist talking about things that are uncomfortable and it is **important** to talk anyway. We tell children that it is **never** too late to talk about problems and that **no** problem is too small.

This principle is just as true for adults as it is for children. **Any** behavior that has bothered you to the point of complaining about someone to others or thinking less of someone is **never** too trivial to discuss with that person directly or, if appropriate, with the person responsible for supervising that individual.

In Kidpower, we choose to believe that most people are good. If this is true, then it makes sense to start with the assumption that most people have the best intentions, even if they do things that are hurtful or wrong. I once had a man in my community who surprised me by apologizing for some actions he took thirty years earlier and that I had always thought less of him for. My assumption that this man didn't care was a pity because he had made some great contributions to our community and might have been a huge resource if I had given him a chance.

Take a moment to stop and think whether there is *anything* you've been wondering or worrying about, or that you have repeated to someone else, that might affect the credibility of another person or that you are hanging onto yourself - even if it was long ago or seems trivial. If you realize that you have any unresolved concerns or negative perceptions, see if you can find a way to speak up about it to the appropriate person or persons.

Most people don't like being told that you are unhappy with them, so be prepared to persist. Think of possible negative responses and practice positive answers rather than giving up because of someone's initial resistance. Some problems with others won't be resolved no matter what you do, but you won't know if you don't try.

Commitment to integrity in communication takes courage and involves some risks – and can lead to great rewards in helping us to strengthen our relationships and make the most out of our lives.