



Child and Family Support System

## Common Elements

Module: Enhancing Family  
Functioning and Safety

Practice: Communication Skills



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**“The Aboriginal Cultural Lenses of Practice” Artist Sasha Houthuysen**

## Acknowledgment of Country

We respectfully acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners and occupants of lands and waters of this country, whose practices and dreaming are still living through Elder’s past, present and emerging.

Further, we acknowledge that the spiritual, social, cultural, and economic practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples come from connection and maintained of lands, waters, values, heritage beliefs, languages and lore which are of ongoing importance. From the past, in the present, into the future, forever.

We acknowledge the impact of historical policies that were harmful and have contributed to intergenerational trauma. This includes policies and practices of colonisation that have had a profound impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s connection to country, culture, and one another.

We aim to continue to apply a cultural lens when we work together to promote a cultural evidence base that centres around self-determination, choice, and a healing approach, through Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. All while valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as strong, resilient people, and decision makers in their own lives.

## About this document

The South Australian government is committed to creating a cohesive Child and Family Support System (CFSS).

One in three children born in South Australia (SA) are reported to the Department for Child Protection by age 10. Most of those children's families have multiple and complex needs.

Children and young people who are removed from their families and placed in care experience trauma that can continue to impact on their health and wellbeing throughout their lives and across generations. For Aboriginal families and communities, the intergenerational trauma from Stolen Generations and children being forcefully taken from their communities and culture both adds and gives context to the complexities.

The CFSS is committed to ensuring Aboriginal children remain front, centre and highly visible in our work with families and communities. The CFSS commits to understanding and valuing Aboriginal Cultural strengths, enabling self-determination and being honest about the truth of our shared histories, the hurts, the strengths, and the healing. It is only by doing these actions and being true and active allies will we see change.

The "Roadmap for Reforming the Child and Family Support System (CFSS) 2021–2023" outlines the steps that the South Australian government (Department of Human Services) is taking to strengthen the CFSS workforce to intervene early, build positive relationships with families, improve family wellbeing, and avert the need for greater engagement with the child protection system.

The *Common Elements* is one strategy adopted to enhance the CFSS workforce. The *Common Elements*, once bedded into the CFSS workforce, will build greater consistency for families engaging in the CFSS, adds to the pre-existing skills amongst CFSS staff, enhance evidence-based practice and enable access to quality clinical supervision and mentoring.

The *Common Elements* are evidence-informed (the 'common elements' of programs / interventions known to be effective, and / or supported by evidence from multiple sources) and designed to be used flexibly in response to families' needs.

The *Common Elements* approach is being implemented by DHS in partnership with the Centre for Evidence and Implementation (CEI). CEI is a global, not-for-profit organisation dedicated to using the best evidence in practice and policy to improve the lives of children, families, and communities facing adversity. Refer to the '*Common Elements: Background and Introduction - Explaining the Common Elements*' document for more information.

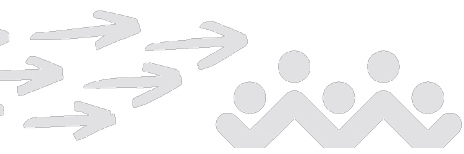
Each practice guide is comprised of an overview of the practice and its purpose, cultural considerations, key capabilities, practice strategies, outcomes, and practice points. It should be a practitioner's go-to resource, in addition to training and coaching in delivering these practices with fidelity.

The information in this publication can be provided in an alternative format on request. Please email [EIRD@sa.gov.au](mailto:EIRD@sa.gov.au)

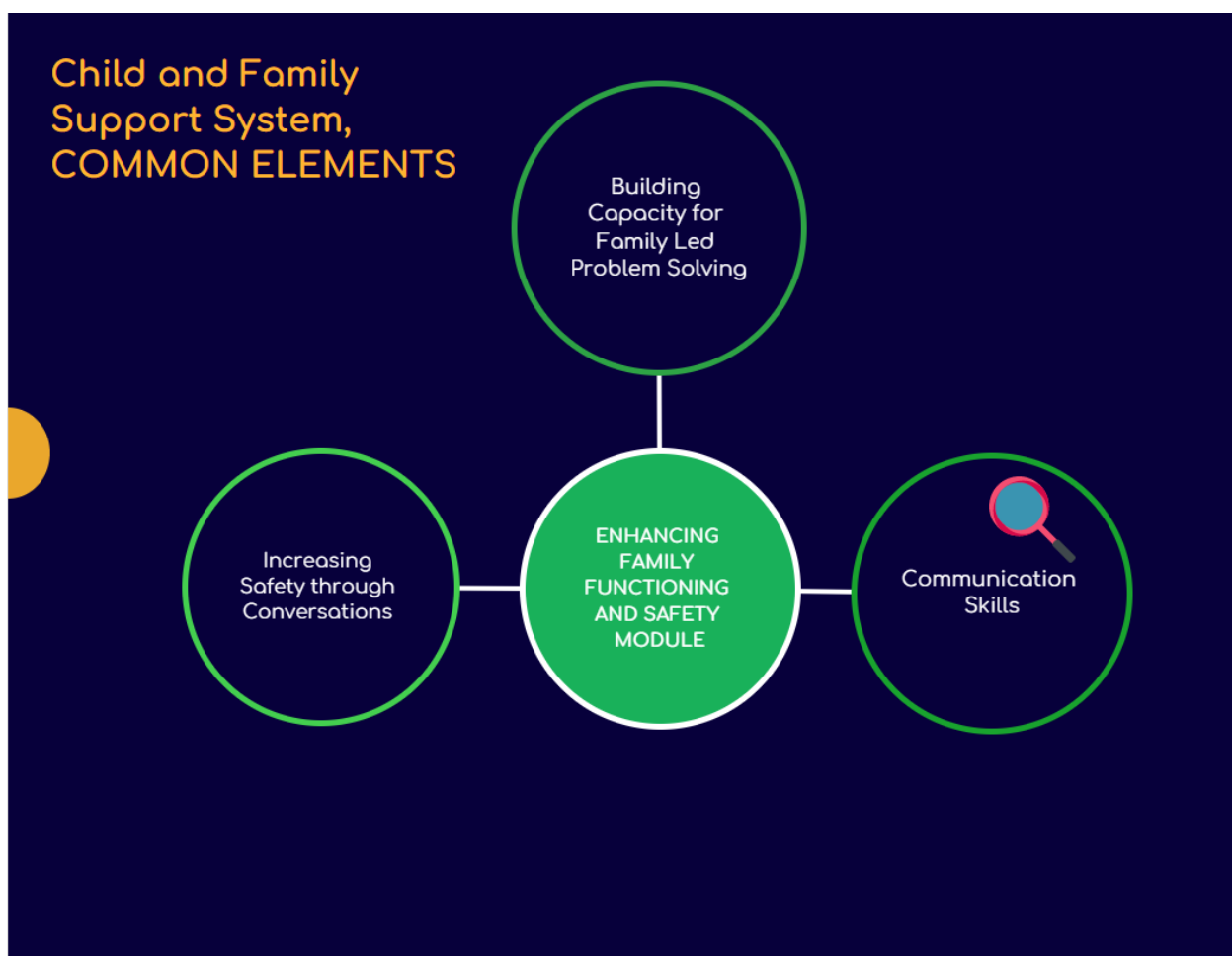
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In this document, 'Aboriginal' respectfully refers to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, acknowledging that we work in the context of Aboriginal lands and community.

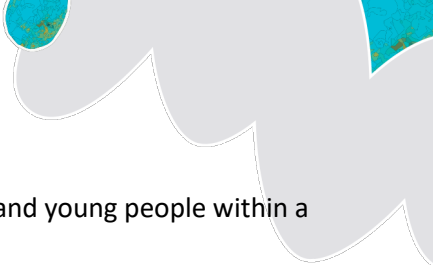


## Overview



The impact of trauma, adverse life experiences or events, and the developmental needs of children that change over time are just a few reasons why families may experience issues with communication. Communication difficulties and negative or distressing interactions can erode or prevent the establishment of stable and positive relationships. Skill-building in effective communication can assist with building positive relationships. Good communication improves understanding and can prevent and resolve conflict.

*Communication Skills* is a practice within the *Enhancing Family Functioning and Safety* module. It focuses on how to teach skills and behaviours to facilitate more positive interpersonal communication between individuals and family members. While this practice guide is targeted to families, the skills are transferrable and can be



used in *all* relationships<sup>1</sup>. Examples used in this guide include those between adults and young people within a family.

## Purpose

*Communication skills* are critical for helping families increase their positive interactions with one another. This guide can be used in several different settings such as:

- ✓ When negative interactions increase the likelihood of family conflict and violence
- ✓ When families would like to improve their communication skills and/or decrease negative interactions
- ✓ To increase positive interactions between children, adolescents, and adults in the family
- ✓ Importantly, this guide is to be used when all participants (all family members) are willing and able to come together to discuss the way they communicate together.

## Allyship Accountability

### Aboriginal Cultural Lens Application

A cultural lens is the consideration and application of how we perceive our environment based on knowledge, values, attitudes, and the traditions of the group with which we most identify. Applying an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural lens means stepping back and considering one's own identity, values and how one's own background and experiences influences these perspectives. When this is understood it creates space to layer additional knowledge, understandings, skills and embrace the shared true histories, culture, and Aboriginal ways of 'knowing, being and doing'. This is also known as allyship accountability.


Aboriginal values are based on enabling, amplifying, and deeply listening to Aboriginal voices across all levels of the kinship system inclusive of children and young people, women, Elders, and men. We recognize that Aboriginal people are a diverse people with rich and deep heritage, these many voices are considered strengths and provide cultural authority and decision making.

Aboriginal family led decision making is critically important when working with Aboriginal families as this assist's practitioners to build trusting partnerships with families to identify areas of concern and to take responsibility for ensuring the safety of children and young people.

Consideration of communication barriers is of high importance as effective communication is key to successful outcomes for families. If English is not a person's first language, then it is vital to seek out translation and interpreting services to ensure language barriers do not compromise service provision. It will also be important that non-Aboriginal practitioners undertake cultural consultation with an appropriate Aboriginal practitioner or cultural authority.

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<sup>1</sup> This guide was developed for working with adults, and young people. Some skills may be developmentally appropriate to use with children. However, practitioners should use their discretion and assessment before determining which skills to use.



Aboriginal peoples may also utilise many communication styles including non-verbal communication such as hand gestures and facial expressions which have different meanings to western cultures, practitioners need to be mindful that this can be seen as a strength and find ways to understand and potentially utilise these communication skills. Aboriginal peoples may also have a preference to agree to a question or say 'yes' to questions, this may be because the question was not understood, to end the conversation, or simply because the topic is uncomfortable to discuss.

Practitioners who focus on relationship-based practices have a greater chance of building strong relationships and comfortability with families, understanding ways the family communicates and communication skills; knowing this is critical to culturally responsive practice and positive outcomes for children, families, and community. It is important to understand that some families may be open and engage well at an initial meeting and other families may take some time before they are ready to engage, if at all.

For Aboriginal families the traumatic impact of colonisation, dispossession of land, Stolen Generations and loss of culture may affect willingness to engage with government departments. Practitioners need to keep this in mind when working with Aboriginal families.

## Applying a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Lens

When working with families from CALD communities' practitioners are advised to seek out more information to create a culturally safe and supportive environment. Liaison with community leaders and or culturally specific support services is encouraged.

Trauma in the CALD community is diverse and unique to the lived experiences and migratory journeys of individuals and families and may include intergenerational trauma. Trauma is often associated with pre migration experiences including human rights abuses.

Post migration these experiences of trauma are often made worse by other challenges, including settlement issues, racial and religious discrimination as well as the multiple losses experienced, loss of country, culture, and family.

Clear and effective communication is key to successful outcomes for families. If English is not a person's first language, then it is vital to seek out translation and interpreting services to ensure language barriers do not compromise service provision.

## Key Capabilities

### Enabling Attitudes

When using *Communication Skills*, it is important for practitioners to adopt the following attitudes or stance towards the family:

- The practitioner believes that all people have different communications styles
- The practitioner believes that all people have the capacity to communicate effectively with others using their unique communication style.

## Practitioner Behaviours

People who engage in verbal conflict typically communicate by blaming, putting each other down, or not listening. This can easily escalate into yelling and physical aggression, making it difficult for conflict to be resolved or problems to be solved. These types of interaction can become habitual, making it harder to break the cycle of ineffective communication and poor problem solving. Children exposed to this behaviour may mirror it in their communication with others outside of the family.

By supporting families and individuals to communicate effectively, practitioners can help to create an environment in which there is less conflict. This will enable opportunities to build skills in successful conflict resolution and problem solving, as well as opportunities for adults to act as positive role models for the children in their lives.

Families engaged in the CFSS often present to practitioners with high risks and multifactorial barriers. It is important to respond to where a family is at, however, it is possible to get caught in this place of crisis response and lose sight of the path to move families out of the CFSS. Practitioners working in the CFSS are required to respond to immediate, short term needs whilst mobilising a strategy to increase family functioning. Supporting families in their communication skills is a critical skill to be developed and enables steps forward. Practitioners must hold onto hope that they can and will make a difference.

It may take some work for families to change ingrained patterns of unhelpful and often destructive patterns of communicating – it takes practice and effort. This requires the practitioner to know the strategies; be confident in applying them and to make time with families to try these strategies and avoid getting stuck in the crisis.

The objective of this practice is for the practitioner to role model and teach positive communication skills to the individual which can be used to enhance all relationships.

As discussion of family communication patterns is inherent within this practice, there may be a risk that this activity creates more arguments. It is therefore critical that practitioners prepare individuals for the activities and continually monitor their readiness to increase the likelihood that the practice will be effective.



<b>Behaviours for practitioners to work towards when using Communication Skills</b> 	<b>Behaviours for practitioners to <u>avoid</u> when using Communication Skills</b> 
<p>The practitioner helps individuals and families identify their own communication strengths and weaknesses.</p> <p>The practitioner is curious about all communication styles.</p> <p>The practitioner models effective communication strategies in their interactions with families and individuals and models the Dos and Don'ts effectively.</p> <p>If there are escalating tensions between participants, the practitioner either re-orientes participants back to the guiding steps or rules for the session, pauses the session, or ends the session (to be reconvened at another time).</p>	<p>The practitioner continues the session despite lack of adherence to the guiding steps or rules for the session.</p> <p>The practitioner continues the session despite the escalation of tension between participants.</p> <p>The practitioner focuses on communication weaknesses and does not focus on communication strengths.</p>

## Practice Strategies

This section provides step by step guidance on how to use *Communication Skills* in practice.

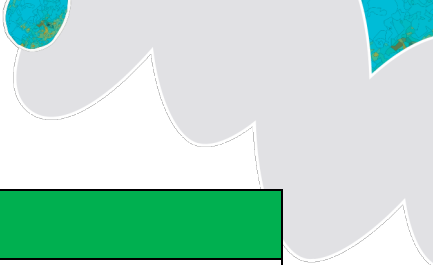
Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
If needed, prepare with the family/individual	<p>Before the practitioner implements the following exercise with the family, they should practise the exercise just with the individual so that they understand the steps and have an opportunity to ask questions.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“Okay, so we’ve decided that one of your goals is to work on family communication and we’ve discussed the idea of sitting down with your partner and son to discuss communication styles. You’ve mentioned even simple discussions can get heated between the three of you sometimes so let’s plan for how we might have that discussion with your partner and your son. How does that sound?”</i></p> <p>This also allows the practitioner to work with the individual to predict and plan for any barriers that might occur. If the family highlights specific issues that may occur during the session, the practitioner might consider a role play with the individual to work out how that issue might be handled.</p>
Introduce the concept of <i>Communication Skills</i>	<p>Introduce the rationale and concepts,</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“The three of you have agreed to come together today to discuss some of the good things about how you communicate and some of the not so good things.”</i></p> <p>Start the exercise, by suggesting four rules or guiding steps for the session:</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“Before we get started today, just to make sure we are communicating effectively, there are four rules for the session. Let me know what you think.”</i></p> <p>Practitioner explains the four steps below, perhaps referring to them written on a card that can act as a prompt throughout the session.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Participants should listen to what others have to say and acknowledge their communication. This can be done by nodding, remaining silent, or responding calmly to what they say.</li> </ol>

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
	<p>2. Participants should talk directly to each other but not about each other. For example:</p> <div data-bbox="507 365 1409 683" style="background-color: #d4edda; padding: 10px; border: 1px solid #c3e6cb; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><i>“Maya, I wanted to speak with you about something that has been worrying me or,</i></p> <p><i>“Jo, it feels like we’re struggling to talk without fighting in front of the kids. Can we set aside time together to work on this?”</i></p> </div> <p>3. Participants should not answer on behalf of another person and should wait their turn to speak. This demonstrates respect for the person that is speaking and is more likely to result in reciprocal respect.</p> <p>4. Identify a code word<sup>2</sup> that can be used if someone is feeling anxious or stressed and needs to take a break. Decide as a group how long the break will be (e.g., 10 to 15 minutes or longer if needed) so the group can come back together and continue the exercise.</p> <p>Next, provide an overview of what you are going to do and what each person’s role will be. For example:</p> <div data-bbox="507 1093 1409 1283" style="background-color: #d4edda; padding: 10px; border: 1px solid #c3e6cb; margin: 10px 0;"> <p><i>Practitioner: “Today we are going to look at how we can all communicate better, including looking at some Dos and Don’ts of good communication. We are not going to discuss any one issue or concern at this point, we are just going to talk generally about communication.”</i></p> </div> <p>Talk Dos:</p> <p>Give each participant a copy of the <a href="#">Communication Skills</a> chart (at end of this document). The practitioner should use their judgement about whether the exercise is developmentally appropriate for children and might use the simplified red and green cards to explain the Dos and Don’ts to children.</p>

<sup>2</sup> A code word is a word the group agrees anyone can use in the group to step away from the conversation and resettle themselves.

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
	<p>Practitioner: <i>“Here I have chart (or cards) that explain communication skills. First, I’d like you to look at the Dos and think about what you do well on that list. Then, I’d like you to see if you can pick out something that someone else in the family does well. As an example, I’ll go first. For example: Maya, you are really good at looking at me when I am talking to you.”</i></p> <p>Talk Don’ts:</p> <p>As with the Dos, ask the family to look at the Don’ts and ask each participant to determine which apply to them. If the meeting remains positive, you can encourage family members to give each other feedback. Be prepared to use your <i>OARS (Open ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections and Summaries)</i> skills to manage any conflict that starts to arise. Remember, if you need to pause the conversation and remind everyone of the four rules or suggest revisiting it another day, make sure to let participants know that it is natural to have to pause such tricky conversations.</p> <p>Pick some Dos:</p> <p>The next step is for each participant to pick one or two Dos that they want to work on to improve their communication within the family. Encourage participants to pick a Do that is the opposite to one of the Don’ts that they identified.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“Now it’s time to choose some Dos that you’d like to work on. I recommend choosing a Do that is the opposite to one of your Don’ts”.</i></p> <p>The above steps can also be done individually with a family member and be practised with the practitioner.</p>
Practice communication skills	<p>If the family are willing, it is helpful to invite them to take turns demonstrating and role-playing examples of Dos and Don’ts. Only do this with caregivers and children present if you feel confident that this will not escalate. For example, a Don’t could be something like:</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“Here is an example of a ‘putdown’: I need you to tell me where you are if you’re not coming home by dark. You are selfish and thoughtless, and you ignore anything I ask of you. This is a putdown because it uses negative labelling and a raised voice.”</i></p> <p><i>An alternative ‘Do’ way of expressing this would be:</i></p>

Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
	<p><i>"I need you to let me know where you are if you're not coming home by dark. I feel upset and worried for your safety when I haven't heard back from you."</i></p> <p><i>This example uses 'I' statements (e.g., "I feel ____ when ____") which is an effective way to communicate feelings without placing blame on another person.</i></p> <p>For some families, you may decide to focus just on the Dos, as discussing Don'ts may trigger escalation.</p> <p>It may not be appropriate to suggest a family/individual to undertake a role play to demonstrate what to do, if this is a communication skill they generally struggle with. To illustrate, if the family struggles to make a request of their child without lecturing, rather than suggesting a role play, model a brief and direct approach to the problem. For example:</p> <p><i>Practitioner: "An example of making a request of a child without lecturing might be: 'I care about your future and want you to go to school each day, so you have choices later'. This would replace an alternative such as: 'You should do what I say when I tell you and that includes going to school every day. You will never be any good at anything if you don't do as you're told'."</i></p> <p>Keep the session focused on easy problems and situations. Only tackle more difficult communication Don'ts when you are confident that it will not escalate. For example, start with how they talk about what they are going to watch on TV or how they are going to spend time together on the weekend.</p>
<p>Introduce real life communication issues and suggest follow up</p>	<p>Introduce real life scenarios:</p> <p>Once the family members have learnt the communication skills and are familiar with them due to practice, you can facilitate a session that involves the family using these communication skills while discussing real life problems.</p> <p><i>Practitioner: "Maya, you mentioned you were worried about Tom taking money from your purse without asking. Tom would you be okay with us talking about how your mum might communicate with you about this?"</i></p> <p>If you pick a topic that may potentially trigger negative emotions, be sure to remind the family about using the code word if they feel too agitated to continue.</p> <p>Suggest ways of continued use and follow up.</p>



Steps/Components	Skills/Strategies
	<p>Suggest that they display the <i>Communication Skills</i> chart somewhere visible in the home and encourage them to practice between your sessions. Remember to ask how it went next time you see them.</p> <p>Practitioner: <i>“Thanks for being brave enough to try some other ways of communicating with each other – I know it can feel a bit odd to do this, but I really believe that if you can try and remember these simple strategies, you may all feel more settled, heard and respected. Next time we catch up, perhaps we could discuss some of the other issues you wanted to talk through – in the meantime try and each remember your communication Dos. As a reminder, would you like a copy of the Dos and Don’ts list?”</i></p>

# Outcomes

## Practice level outcomes

- The family has increased communication skills and ability to resolve problems more collaboratively.
- The family has increased confidence to communicate effectively with each other.
- The family can communicate effectively with services to meet their family's needs.
- Practitioners can develop stronger therapeutic relationships with family.

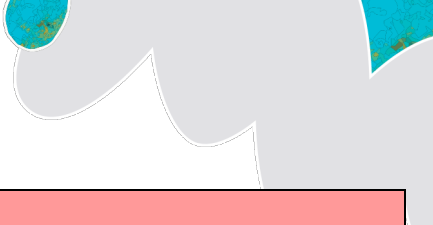
## Practice Points

- Role playing potentially difficult issues with the family can be complicated and may need some forward planning on the practitioner's part. If you are aware of specific issues within the family that align with the Dos and Don'ts, make sure you consider these issues when you select an example for you and the family to role play. Also consider role playing with colleagues before attempting to deliver the session with all participants.
- It may help to use an object to pass back and forth to indicate who the 'speaker' is at that point in time. You can suggest this beforehand when planning the session with the family, but let the family decide whether they would like to use this approach.
- Start discussions with topics that the participants perceive as 'low difficulty'. Asking them to choose the low difficulty conversations (and checking with every participant) may be important.
- Encourage families to praise one another during practice, ensuring you clearly describe what you observed to reinforce positive communication and behaviour change.
- Use affirmations *OARS - Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections and Summaries*) throughout to motivate use of the Dos.
- *Communication Skills* may need to be covered in more than one meeting.

### Four rules or guiding steps for the Family Communication Skills discussion

1. Participants should listen to what others have to say and acknowledge their communication. This can be done by nodding, remaining silent, or responding calmly to what they say.
2. Participants should talk directly to each other but not about each other. For example:  
*"Maya, I wanted to speak with you about something that has been worrying me about you."*  
*or*  
*"Jo, it feels like we're struggling to talk without fighting in front of the kids. Can we set aside time together to work on this?"*
3. Participants should not answer on behalf of another person and should wait their turn to speak. This demonstrates respect for the person that is speaking and is more likely to result in reciprocal respect.
4. Identify a code word that can be used if someone is feeling anxious or stressed and needs to take a break. Decide as a group how long the break will be (e.g., 10 to 15 minutes or longer if needed) so the group can come back together and continue the exercise.

Communication Skills	
DOs	DON'Ts
<p>Use brief statements of 10 words or less</p> <p>Use 'I' statements (e.g. 'I feel ___ when ___') or take responsibility for your own actions</p> <p>Use direct and specific statements (e.g. 'Stop teasing your sister')</p> <p>Actively listen with good eye contact, leaning forward, nodding</p> <p>Let each person completely state his/her thoughts before stating yours</p> <p>Give feedback/paraphrase (e.g. restate what another said to you)</p> <p>Be constructive (e.g., 'I'm concerned about your grades,' 'Something is bothering me. Can we discuss it?')</p> <p>Use a neutral/natural tone of voice</p> <p>Say what you mean. Be specific and straightforward</p> <p>Stay on one topic</p> <p>Focus on the 'here and now'</p> <p>Match verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g. saying 'I love you' while smiling)</p> <p>Express feelings to others appropriately</p> <p>Use appropriate facial expressions toward others</p> <p>Really listen to others' point of view and ask questions to make sure you understand</p>	<p>Long lectures or 'sermons'</p> <p>Blaming (e.g., 'It's your fault.')</p> <p>You don't listen to me</p> <p>Vague statements (e.g., 'Shape up, knock it off, I don't like that')</p> <p>Asking negative questions (e.g., 'Why do you always do that?', 'How many times must I tell you?')</p> <p>Poor non-verbal listening with looking away, silent treatment, crossing arms</p> <p>Interrupting others</p> <p>Not checking to see if you really understand others</p> <p>Put-downs (e.g. 'You're worthless,' 'I'm sick of you'), threats</p> <p>Yelling and screaming</p> <p>Sarcasm</p> <p>Going from topic to topic</p> <p>Bringing up old issues, past behaviour</p> <p>Not matching verbal and non-verbal communications (e.g., saying 'I love you' while pounding your fist angrily on the table)</p> <p>Keeping feelings inside</p> <p>'Mind reading' or assuming you know what other people think</p>



DO: Use short sentences

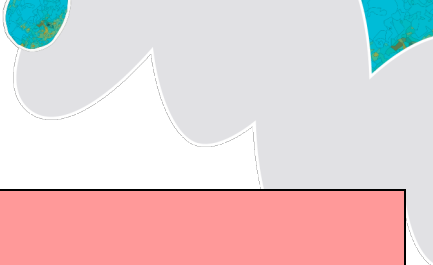
DON'T: Give long lectures

DO: Talk about how you feel when you do things ('I' statements)

DON'T: Blame others for how you feel

DO: Be specific when you're speaking

DON'T: Be unclear or hazy



DO: Show you are listening (eye contact, nodding, face the person)

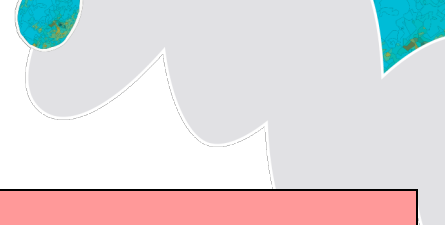
DON'T: Be rude

DO: Let each person finish their sentence before you start yours

DON'T: Cut off others or make faces while the other is speaking

DO: Give feedback (reword what someone has said to you)

DON'T: Interrupt when someone is speaking



DO: Talk about  
problems with positive  
language

DON'T: Put others  
down

DO: Speak calmly

DON'T: Shout

DO: Be honest and  
clear

DON'T: Yell to get  
your point across



DO: Stay on topic

DON'T: Go off track  
when you're  
speaking

DO: Focus on the  
here and now

DON'T: Get  
distracted

DO: Match words with  
actions

DON'T: Use actions  
that do not match  
what you are saying



DO: Say how you  
feel calmly and with  
respect

DON'T: Bottle things  
up

DO: Listen to others  
and ask questions to  
make sure you  
understand them

DON'T: Assume you  
know what others  
think  
or mean

DO: Be aware of your  
facial expressions

DON'T: Laugh when  
someone is talking  
about a  
sad topic

### Reflective questions for practitioners

- Consider a family you are currently working with. - how do they communicate as a family? Could this be improved? What are the barriers to respectful communication?
- When you think of a family you have worked with can you identify communication 'don'ts', why do you think these skills are a struggle for some families?
- Are there any cultural considerations you need to explore when engaging with families?
- What do these look like? How do you ensure your communication is culturally responsive and informed?
- Do you feel confident in implementing the approach described above in your practice? Can you practice within your team prior to working with families?

# Notes



