



Metacommunication

Communication about Communicating

Metamessages

Verbal and non-verbal

Metacommunication is a valuable skill for effective family interaction; it is helpful for both maintaining and repairing relationships. Research has found metacommunications to be positively related to relationship satisfaction. In other words, the better the communication about communicating, the higher the relationship satisfaction. Intentional metacommunication involves talking consciously about the content and context of messages.

Examples of verbal metamessages:

“You sound very worried about our finances.”

Emailing a request for homecoming plans of adult daughter

“I’m glad we talked.”

Talking about a past argument

Examples of non-verbal metamessages:

Nodding affirmation while listening

Winking while teasing a sibling

May be especially useful for checking understanding:

“Does what I said make sense to you?”

“I think you were trying to apologize. Is that right?”

Gender Difference?

Acitelli

While there is little research overall on metacommunications, some research (Acitelli) has found that talking about talking may be more highly valued by women than men—unless there is a problem or conflict. What have you found in your relationships? Do women seem to enjoy or encourage talking about the pattern of communication in the family? Do men hesitate to discuss such topics except when forced? Or, are these ideas just perpetuating stereotypical gender roles?

Within Family

Framing and Reframing



Metamessages send meanings that would be called **framing** by Bateson or Goffman. Framing tells us how to interpret the words we hear. **Reframing** involves communicating in a different way to alter the meaning of the interaction. Reframing may include looking at things in a new way, or looking beneath the words, **much like observing an iceberg**.

For example, if a parent says, “Have you thought of...?” we may hear the words as unsought-advice. We could decide to re-frame the message by changing the way we interpret what was said. We could re-frame the advice as a suggestion from a friend rather than an interfering parent. Reframing includes rejecting old rules of communicating. It may be necessary to remove yourself from the system long enough to view it objectively.

One of the ironies about families is that they can be the greatest source of both pain and comfort. Our past history with family members allows them to know our “triggers” or sore spots. What words will insult you the most or remind you of past humiliations? They also know our successes and joys. With just a glance, family members can signal approval and pride.

Sometimes it is necessary to separate the messages, the intertwined affirmations and disconfirmations from family members. Talking about the messages you are receiving may be the first step. Reframing may help you think differently about someone else’s way of talking.

Metacommunications enhances the reframing process...talking about talking or talking about the whole messages.