Becoming an Authentic Communicator

by Johnna Darragh Ernst

We are constantly communicating. From the moment we wake 'til our day comes to a close, we send and receive messages. These messages impact our ability to form meaningful connections with others. Early childhood professionals use communication to form meaningful relationships with children, with their families, and with colleagues. Communication is such an incredibly important skill, yet one that's often taken for granted.

Stopping to meaningfully reflect on and develop communication skills might be something that's done when communication goes awry — perhaps you are struggling in a relationship with a coworker, or maybe you just don't feel that you are connecting with the parent of a child in your class. Pausing and thinking about communication at these times can assist with problem solving and potential conflict resolution. However, mindfully reflecting on your contributions to communication exchanges and brushing up on foundational skills before challenges arise can sharpen your capacity to serve as a communication partner and enhance the connections you make with others.

What does it mean to truly connect with someone else? Is connection merely having your messages understood and understanding the messages of another? Or is the goal of connection deeper than that? One possible goal is that of *authenticity* — where communication is infused with integrity and empathy and your interactions represent your truest, most powerful self. According to Brown (2010), authenticity emerges from a sense of personal worthiness and courage. Authenticity creates a climate of respect. When you communicate authentically, others can communicate from a space that represents their truest, most powerful selves.

Unfortunately, there are many daily roadblocks to authentic communication. Distraction is a big culprit: you might have a long list of things on your mind to do, and on your desk a cell phone constantly dinging with the pressing concerns of others, and an ever-busy and bustling classroom. Multiple things require your attention at the same time. Learning to practice *mindfulness* in communication is an important first step toward authenticity.

Mindfulness

Naomi is talking with the parent of a three year old in her class. The parent is concerned that her child is not engaging with her peers. The conversation is taking place during morning drop-off, and Naomi is having a hard time focusing. Naomi is aware of several other parents who are waiting to talk with her. Although her co-teacher is creating an engaging environment for the children in the classroom, Naomi is struggling with the desire to quickly end the conversation.

Situations like Naomi's are common—one individual within a communication exchange might have a very important message to convey, but time and place for the communication partner is problematic. Finding time for a more in-depth discussion is necessary. Prior to deciding if additional time and another place for conversation is needed, it is important to mindfully participate in the communication exchange. Mindful communication requires being *fully present* and *attending*. When you are *fully present:*

- you are in the moment, blocking out distractors. Your mind is alert and in tune to your communication partner.
- your body communicates your interest — you lean in slightly with open arms, nodding your head at appropriate intervals.
- you work to clear your mind of all but the message being conveyed.
- you are open to the possibilities that the communication exchange brings.

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When you are *attending*:

- you focus on the message that your communication partner is conveying.
- you listen with your ears and eyes, taking in words as well as non-verbal messages.
- you actively work to suspend judgment about the messages you are receiving.

Being fully present and attending requires accepting responsibility for your contributions to the exchange and recognizing that outcomes are based on your understanding the messages conveyed.

For Naomi, being mindful will enable her to understand the parent's viewpoint. Naomi can then respond to the parent from a space that reflects that understanding, communicating respect. Should further exploration and an in-depth discussion be needed, she can suggest an alternative time to meet.

A lack of mindfulness risks mindlessness. According to Dan Huston, author of *Communicating Mindfully* (2010), mindlessness contributes to missed opportunities: opportunities to make connections and learn what others are thinking; opportunities to explore new solutions to problems; opportunities to represent your best self; and opportunities to convey respect for your communication partner.

Authentic communication requires much more than understanding the messages of others. Communication is a complex, bi-directional, *and* emotional process. During communication, we work to understand the messages of others, and often have emotional reactions to these messages. Your reactions to these messages might be positive, negative, or neutral.

Naomi, for example, will have her own perceptions about what the parent is communicating; perhaps she has similar concerns about the child. Or maybe she has not noticed the child's challenges in the classroom. She might interpret the parent's concern as anxiety or even question why the parent is so concerned. For Naomi to engage in authentic communication, it's important that she recognize her perceptions and their impact on her reactions.

Another important skill in authentic communication, therefore, is learning to *explore existing perceptions.*

Exploring Existing Perceptions

Perceptions are our reactions to the messages we receive, and can provide explanations for events or the actions of others. One of the challenges that exists with communication is that our perceptions are not always accurate: they are strongly shaped by unique schemas that are developed based on past experiences. Schemas represent mental structures that consist of related bits of information; we put these bits of information together, and develop larger and more complex patterns of meaning (O'Hair & Weineman, 2009). Schemas, as accepted storylines, can be very beneficial as they tell us what to generally expect in interactions. For example, when I pick up the phone and say, "Hello," I expect that someone will respond. As schemas represent general expectations, we don't necessarily think of them or recognize that we have them. It's not until these unwritten codes or expectations are violated that we even realize we had expectations for how things would proceed.

Just as they can be beneficial, schemas can also be limiting. Schemas can create *selective perception*, where an automatic interpretation of the situation replaces an authentic evaluation (O'Hair & Weineman, 2009). For example, imagine that Naomi has a schema, or storyline, that the parent she is interacting with is *always* expressing a concern regarding her child's development. Naomi feels that these concerns are not warranted. Naomi, because of this schema, may be less likely to truly focus on what the parent is saying.

As schemas are often automatic, we may not even recognize we are applying them. When confronted with data that contradicts our existing schemas, we often do one of two things: disregard the contradicting information or change our schema. If we continuously disregard contradictory information, our schemas can be inaccurate. The storylines we create become out of sync with emerging information and the realities of others (Huston, 2010).

If Naomi typically disregards the parent's concerns, but can acknowledge now that she has an existing schema, her careful attention to the mother's concerns could guide her to a new understanding. If she were to examine her perceptions, Naomi would investigate the issue more closely and observe the child in the classroom. Perhaps Naomi will learn from the mother that her daughter is not connecting with other children outside of class. Are there possible connections with other children and families that Naomi can help this child and family make? If Naomi does not move beyond her initial schema, she will never know if her initial reaction is accurate or inaccurate, and could miss additional information and opportunities to connect with and support this family.

Learning about your existing schemas involves carefully listening to your reactions. During a communication exchange, stop and focus inward: What is your internal voice saying? You may catch yourself thinking, "Well, he always…" or "That is just how she reacts…" or "Isn't that just typical?" These thoughts reflect assumptions. Assumptions are often based on faulty schemas and can contribute to selective perception: we see behaviors that fit our expectations. For example, if you *always* expect a parent to express disapproval during your interactions, you are likely to look for that behavior and disregard interactions where that behavior doesn't occur. When we make

assumptions, we stop looking for why certain behaviors might be happening and operate based on storylines that we have in our heads. Learning to look beyond this automatic response creates an opportunity to search for accurate explanations free of existing perceptions and schemas. This is referred to as *adopting a clean-slate perspective*.

Adopting a Clean-Slate Perspective

Clean-slate perspectives free us from existing schemas (Brown & Richard, 2003). Each interaction becomes a new opportunity to connect without existing bias. In each communication exchange:

- you carefully tune in to your communication partner.
- you are fully aware of your own perceptions and schemas.
- you have the ability to make choices mindfully about your reactions based on the information presented.
- you are truly open to communication as you are invested in the exchange.

To adopt a clean-slate perspective, it's important to:

- practice mindfulness, and actively tune in to what the other individual is saying.
- learn to listen to your own perceptions:
  - What information do they give you about your own schemas and potential biases?
  - How might these perceptions influence your interactions?
- choose to respond based on a clean slate, where you consider the information in front of you as opposed to previously acquired assumptions that may or may not be accurate.

It's important to note that some schemas can be very beneficial in the context of communication. For example, we have schemas that inform us about preferred modes of communication, and schemas that provide us with information that we use in the context of relationships. There are, however, schemas that can detract from meaningful connection. These can often emerge from previous interactions that we have perceived as challenging. It is these schemas that benefit most from reexamination. Let's check in with Naomi one last time.

Naomi adopts a clean-slate perspective when she frees her mind from thinking that the mother is acting in a way that reflects her ungrounded concerns about her daughter. Instead, she truly listens to what the mother has to say. Naomi is now approaching the interaction without her previous biases. She gathers information that she can then respond to; this information is not clouded by a lens that has predisposed her to disregard what the mother has to say.

Take a moment to consider your own goals for connection. How do your daily communication skills and strategies support your overall goals? Reflect on how being mindful, exploring existing perceptions, and adopting a clean-slate perspective might deepen your ability to authentically communicate and connect with others, thereby deepening the relationships of those you interact with on a daily basis.

References

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CORRECTION NOTICE: The article "Technology as a Teaching Partner in the Early Childhood Classroom" by Michelle Salcedo in our March/April 2016 issue of *Exchange Magazine* contained an improper citation. Ms. Salcedo references an article "Technology in ECE Classrooms" written by Fran Simon, Karen Nemeth, and Dale McManis that was published in the September/October 2013 edition of *Exchange Magazine*.

While Ms. Salcedo used sources from the original article, she did not mean to imply that the authors are against technology in the classroom, as they clearly are not. They are skilled and passionate advocates of the power of appropriate technology in the early childhood classroom. Their work has guided much innovation and research in this area. Ms. Salcedo apologizes for any misunderstanding that may have occurred.

To read the article "Technology in ECE Classrooms," visit: www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue.