

# Developing & Maintaining Positive Family Communication

In-Depth Guide to Building Trust and  
Great Relationships Between Families & Staff

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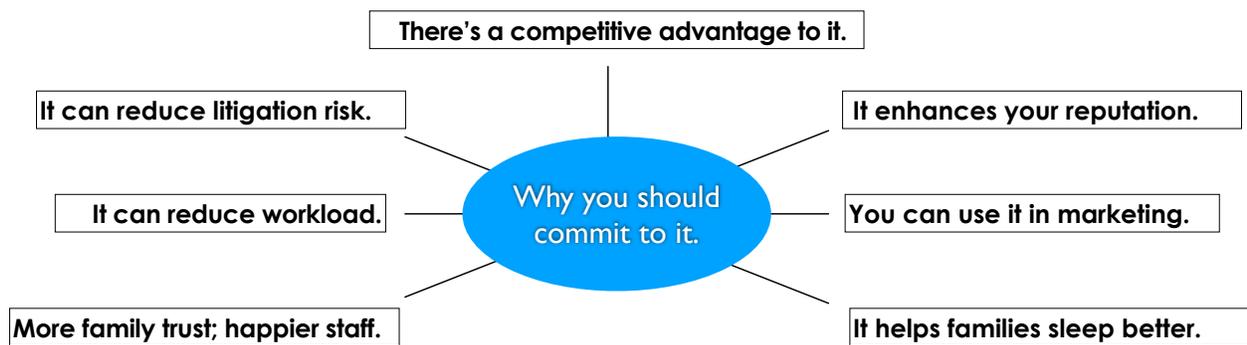
# Today, you'll learn how to

1. Describe the most effective strategies in maintaining positive relationships
2. Train new/current staff in communication best practices
3. Ask THE most important question at time of resident admission
4. Use phrases that enhance communication — whether addressing a positive or negative situation
5. Follow the difficult discussion blueprint
6. Leverage in-person and email to strengthen the relationship

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# Dividends from positive family communication.



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# 1

## Lay the Broad Foundation Early

- Begin with warm, personal introductions to help families feel welcomed and valued.
- Clearly explain your role and responsibilities, as well as who will be the primary contact person for different care concerns.

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## Lay the Broad Foundation Early

- Outline how communication will take place (phone, email, in-person meetings) and the expected frequency of updates.
  - What are their preferences, typical best time of availability?
- Be transparent about the care facility's capabilities and any limitations to avoid misunderstandings later.

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## Show You Care Beyond Medical Needs

- Take time to learn the resident's personal history, hobbies, and preferences to personalize care.
- Invite families to participate in activities, celebrations, and care planning meetings to deepen connection.
- Touch base: "I had a really interesting chat with your dad about...."
- Demonstrate interest in the resident's life outside of their medical condition.

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## Keep Communication Proactive

- Contact families regularly, even when there is no change in condition, to foster ongoing trust.
- Share uplifting news such as participation in activities or progress in therapy before addressing concerns.
- Alert families promptly to any significant changes, such as falls, new medical diagnoses, or changes to the care plan.
- Use proactive communication to prevent small issues from escalating into larger concerns.

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## Practice Active Listening

- Maintain eye contact and avoid distractions when speaking with families
  - It signals their concerns are important.
- Acknowledge feelings by repeating back key points to confirm your understanding.
- Resist the urge to push back (become defensive) — treat complaints as valuable insights into improving care.
- Offer to follow up on unresolved concerns with a clear timeline for response.

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## Control the Narrative

- Replace medical jargon with easy-to-understand terms.
- Combine honesty with empathy by acknowledging the emotional impact if something negative that happened.
- Break down complex information into smaller, digestible steps and check for their understanding.
- Resist the urge to push back (become defensive — treat complaints as valuable insights into improving care.
- Summarize key discussion points and next steps before ending.

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## Nursing Home Staff Communication Training Kit

Things to impart to your staff

## Training Objectives for Staff

- Understand the critical role of communication in resident and family satisfaction.
- Learn and apply best practices for proactive, respectful, and transparent communication.
- Develop confidence in delivering both positive updates and difficult news.
- Practice active listening skills to understand and validate family concerns.
- Strengthen problem-solving skills in emotionally charged conversations.

## Talk About Why Communication Matters

- Builds trust between families and the care team, reducing anxiety and stress.
  - For both families and staff
- Prevents misunderstandings that can lead to complaints or grievances.
- Improves family satisfaction scores, impacting facility reputation and ratings.
- Enhances teamwork by ensuring everyone is informed and aligned.
- Supports better resident outcomes through collaborative decision-making.

## Stress consistency.

- Make sure all staff provide the same information to families to avoid confusion or mistrust.
- Document important interactions with families so that any staff member (next shift) can pick up the conversation seamlessly.
- Provide ongoing staff training on communication skills, including conflict resolution and cultural sensitivity.

## Training Format

- 20-minute interactive sessions: introduce topics, role-play, and discussion.
  - Role-play scenarios based on real-life situations to build practical skills.
- Longer timeframes can be used for new hires
- Group reflection on examples of successful and unsuccessful communication.
- On-the-job coaching to reinforce skills learned in training.

## Sample Role-Play Scenarios

- Notifying a family of a resident's fall while providing reassurance & a clear plan.
- Delivering a weekly progress update with both positive and challenging elements.
- Responding to a complaint about food quality with empathy and solutions.
- Explaining a medication change in simple, understandable terms.
- Sharing a resident's achievement in therapy or activities to strengthen connection.
- De-escalating an upset family member in the lobby.

## On-the-Job Coaching Tips

- Observe real interactions and provide immediate, constructive feedback.
- Encourage shadowing of skilled communicators for new or struggling staff.
- Incorporate customer service issues into shift handoffs and care meetings.
- Recognize staff who receive positive family feedback.
- Address communication breakdowns promptly with supportive correction.

## Post-Training Reinforcement

- Daily huddles: Share a communication tip or positive example.
- Incorporate communication skill assessment into annual performance reviews.
- Use family surveys to measure communication satisfaction.
- Turn family compliments and feedback into team learning opportunities.
- Place quick-reference cards and checklists at nurse stations and staff break rooms.

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Learn the family's essential.

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Ask THE most important question during  
admission/move-in

*"In our center, we provided person-centered care.*

*We want to make certain we provide your dad with the best experience.*

*What is the MOST important thing for us to  
keep in mind about your dad that will help us do that?"*

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## Positive and Negative Phrases for Family Communication

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## Positive, Trust-Building Phrases

Warm Greetings	'Hi [Name], it's so nice to see you. How are you today?'	Establishes that you remember them.
Positive Start	'I wanted to share some good news about [Name] — they really enjoyed [activity] today.'	Makes it clear you are out & about and that you notice what residents are doing.
Acknowledging Concerns	'I understand you're concerned. Let's go over what happened and what we can do.'	Validates their feelings.
Transparent Difficult News	'I wanted to let you know about something important and explain the steps we're taking.'	Honest yet constructive.
Open-Door	'Please reach out anytime — we're here to work together for [Name]'s care.'	Encourages ongoing dialogue.

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## Negative, Trust-Eroding Phrases

Problematic	Why	Creates impression of	Alternative
'That's just how it is.'	Dismissive	Inflexibility (and disinterest)	'This is the current process, but I'm open to exploring other options.'
'It's not a big deal.'	Minimizing	Families aren't heard or their concerns are undervalued.	I understand this is important to you. Let's talk about how to best address it.'
'She's new here.'	Passing the Buck	Staff not well trained (competent).	I appreciate you pointing out something we may need to expand upon in training new staff.'
'I'll talk with Jack about it. Hopefully, I'll catch him in a good mood today.'	Creating Uncertainty	Staff don't work as a team.	I'll talk with Jack directly. I know he appreciates suggestions from family members.'
'That's not my job.'	Deflecting Responsibility	Signals a lack of ownership by staff.	I'm happy to help where I can. Let me see how I can support this or guide you to the right person....'

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## Negative, Trust-Eroding Phrases

Problematic	Why	Creates impression of	Alternative
'Their INR was low, so we adjusted Coumadin per protocol.'	Overusing Jargon	Confuses non-medical listeners.	'We check often to see how your dad is doing with his blood thinner. When his last test showed a score that was too low, his doctor adjusted his dosage to reduce risk of blood clots.'
'You'll just have to wait and see.'	Abrupt Closure	Leaves families uncertain and frustrated.	I understand this is important to you. Let's talk about how to best address it.'
'We didn't do anything wrong.'	Defensive Stance	Focuses on blame, not solution.	'Let's look at what happened and how we can fix it together.'
'That's not my job.'	Deflecting Responsibility	Signals a lack of ownership by staff.	I'm happy to help where I can. Let me see how I can support this or guide you to the right person....'
'We emailed you about this 2 days ago.'	Dismissive	The family member doesn't pay attention.	'I know you receive a ton of emails every day. It's no problem to send it again. If you have any questions about it, just give me a call.'

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## Changing the Tone to Positive

	Avoid	Use Instead
Frame limitations positively	'No, we can't'	'Here's what we can do...'
Shift from blame to guidance	'If you were concerned about this, you should have....'	'If some thing concerns you in the future, come talk to me.'
Create a partnership	'That's really the responsibility of the family.'	'Let's work on this together.....'
Personalize the discussion	'We see that a lot when people with dementia won't remember.....'	'Let's sit and talk about the things you've noticed your Dad becoming more confused about.'

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## Difficult Discussion Blueprint

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## 1. Prepare Before the Conversation

- Review resident's chart, incident reports, and care notes.
- Anticipate likely questions and prepare answers.
- Choose a private, quiet space without interruptions.
- Bring the staff member most familiar with the situation to the meeting.

## 2. Open with Respect and Acknowledgment

- Greet family warmly by name and thank them for meeting.
  - Don't go in expecting the worst.'
- Acknowledge their role in the resident's life.
- Example:  
*'Thank you for taking the time to talk today. I wanted us to meet so we can discuss something important about your mom's care and make sure we're all on the same page.'*

### 3. State the Purpose Clearly

- Be direct but gentle about the reason for the meeting.
- Avoid vague or misleading language — clarity builds trust.
  - Example: 'I want to explain what happened during your dad's fall yesterday, what we've done so far, and how we'll prevent it from happening again.'

### 4. Share the Facts First

- Stick to objective, chronological details.
- Avoid speculation unless stated as such.
- Example:

*'At 8:15 this morning, your mom was walking from her bed to the bathroom when she lost her balance. Our CNA was in the room and helped ease her to the floor. She did not hit her head, but she does have some bruising.'*

## 5. Address Emotions Before Solutions

- Pause to let them react before offering solutions.
- Listen actively without interrupting.
- Acknowledge their feelings: 'I understand this is upsetting.'

## 6. Offer the Plan and Next Steps

- Explain immediate actions taken after the incident.
- Outline steps to prevent recurrence.
- State who will follow up and when.
- Example

*'The nurse checked her vital signs, and just to be thorough, we contacted our mobile x-ray provider. While we were fairly certain she didn't break a bone, we'd rather BE CERTAIN.*

*We've added a fall mat, and her medications are being reviewed. I've also arranged a physical therapy evaluation for tomorrow in the morning. The therapist and I will call you after the evaluation tomorrow to update you.'*

## 7. Invite Collaboration

- Ask for their input and ideas.
- Encourage sharing of past successful strategies.
- Example:

*'Is there anything you've noticed that might help us keep her even safer?  
We'd like to work on this together.'*

## 8. Document the Conversation

- Provide a direct contact number for questions. Record date, attendees, summary, and agreed actions.
- Log conversation in the resident's chart or communication record.
- Email the daughter:
  - *'So just to recap: we discussed the fall, the steps taken, and the changes we're putting in place. Again, I'll follow up tomorrow after the PT assessment. You can reach me directly at this number if you need anything before then or have any questions.'*

## Using Email & Voicemail to Strengthen Family Relationships

## Make Communication Multi-Channel

- Identify the best communication method for the message: phone or in-person for sensitive updates, email or text for non-urgent news.
- Use photos or short videos to share moments of joy with families, helping them feel connected.
  - especially if they are not local
- Provide regular newsletters or use a secure online family portal to share events, menus, or policy updates.
- Ensure that all communications are documented for reference and follow-up.

## 1. Use Email & Voicemail as Proactive Touch Points

- Think of communication as relationship maintenance, not just info sharing.
- Don't wait for problems to reach out — share positive updates
  - Ask staff to contribute ideas

*'Your dad enjoyed the sing-along this morning. Beth in activities said he's got a strong voice!'*

*'Your Mom was able to walk nearly 50 feet today without assistance during her therapy with Mike. He was really proud of her & shared the news with me.'*

## 2. Structuring Emails for Clarity & Warmth

- Subject line: Be specific and positive when possible.
- Example Subject: 'Weekly Update for John – Great News from Therapy!'
- Open with greeting and mention resident's name immediately.
- Use short paragraphs, plain language, and highlight positive notes.
- Close by inviting questions and thanking the family.

### 3. Use Voicemails to Sound Warm & Reassuring

- Smile while speaking – it comes through in your voice.
- Keep under 60 seconds for easy listening.
- State name, role, and reason for calling immediately.
- Bad news: Keep calm, avoid alarming language, and include next steps.

### 4. Blend Email & Voicemail for Impact

- Positive voicemail + follow-up photo by email.
- Urgent voicemail + email summary for clarity and documentation.
- Combining methods reinforces the message and builds connection.

## 5. Avoid Common Pitfalls

- Only contacting when there's bad news → mix in positive/neutral updates.
- Using jargon or acronyms → speak plainly.
- Generic mass emails → personalize with names and details.
  - NO "Dear Responsible Party or Family Member"
- No long, rambling voicemails → keep focused on the key point.

## 6. Make it Routine

- Weekly 'positive touch' rule – one positive email/voicemail per resident's family.
- Send quick notes for birthdays, therapy progress, or activity participation.
- Use reminders or EHR tools to schedule outreach.

## Nursing Home Staff – Family Communication Best Practices

This checklist provides quick, actionable steps for nursing home staff to build and maintain positive, trust-based communication with residents' families.

### 1. Lay the Foundation Early

- Introduce yourself and your role to family members upon admission.
- Explain who their main point of contact is and how to reach them.
- Set realistic expectations about care, communication, and timelines.

### 2. Keep Communication Proactive

- Provide regular updates, not just when there's a problem.
- Share positive news and moments before discussing concerns.
- Notify families immediately about significant health or care changes.

### 3. Practice Active Listening

- Give your full attention when speaking with families.
- Acknowledge and validate their concerns and emotions.
- Don't be defensive; view feedback as an opportunity for improvement.

### 4. Use Clear, Compassionate Language

- Avoid medical jargon unless the family is comfortable with it.
- Be truthful yet empathetic when delivering difficult news.
- Summarize important points and agreed actions before ending the conversation.

### 5. Make Communication Multi-Channel

- Use phone or in-person meetings for important updates.
- Send non-urgent updates or photos via email or text when appropriate.
- Share newsletters or portal updates for general announcements.

### 6. Show You Care Beyond Medical Needs

- Ask about and remember the resident's personal preferences and history.
- Encourage family participation in activities and care planning.
- Share small positive moments that show the resident's quality of life.

### 7. Stay Consistent Across Staff

- Ensure all staff members provide consistent, accurate information.
- Document more family interactions (if complaint/concern) for continuity.
- Participate in staff training on effective communication.