

# PeopleTALK:

## Enhancing Your Relationships

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*This lesson is intended to complement the K-State Research and Extension CoupleTALK program.*

Personal relationships take hard work. They don't just happen; they require attention.

This PeopleTALK lesson will help you give more attention to connections with others, and can be particularly helpful for marital and couple relationships. It emphasizes a process of growth and behavioral change that can help people develop stronger and more satisfying relationships.

### EDUCATIONAL GOALS

By the end of this lesson, participants will be able to:

- Recognize behaviors that contribute to positive relationships.
- Plan appropriate community activities for supporting strong interpersonal relationships.

### KEY POINTS OF THIS LESSON

1. Maintaining a strong friendship with a special person is not only satisfying, but it protects the relationship when disagreements arise.
2. Managing differences takes effort and intentional behaviors to avoid damaging a relationship.

### MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Copy of the *PeopleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationships Fact Sheet* (MF-2651) for each participant.
2. Copy of the lesson evaluation survey for each participant.
3. Pen or pencil for each participant.
4. Flip chart, poster board—or other writing board—and markers.
5. Two pieces of plain paper for creating two posters to show during the lesson. On the first paper, write "5.1" so it is easily seen by the group. On the second paper, write in large letters: **"You"** (in a circle with a line diagonally across it).
6. (Optional) Copy the box on pg. 3—titled "Ways to PeopleTALK for Satisfying Relationships"—on card stock paper to make bookmarks, pocket cards or magnets using adhesive magnetic strips for each participant.
7. (Optional) Consider purchasing the booklet *Strengthening Marriages In Your Community: 101 Ideas To Get You Started*. To order, call A & E Family Publishers toll-free at (866) 321-2665 or e-mail your questions to: [info@fambooks.com](mailto:info@fambooks.com). Booklet is \$2.95 per copy with \$2 for shipping, but bulk rates for varying amounts are available (e.g. 50 cents per copy with an order of 100 copies or more, plus shipping costs).

## LESSON PREPARATION

As a leader, teaching this lesson will be smoother if you:

1. Read through the entire teaching guide and accompanying fact sheet before you present the lesson.
2. Try to present the lesson in your own words without reading word for word from the lesson guide. Decide which questions and activities to use.
3. Prepare yourself for each discussion question or activity you decide to do by thinking about people's reactions and how you will lead the group.
4. Prepare materials as indicated under the "Materials Needed" section.
5. Leader notes are indicated in italics throughout the lesson.

## THE LESSON

### Part I: Maintaining a 'Strong Friendship'

People often think being married for a long time, or having a life-long friend, means little effort and work goes into that relationship. Whether you realize it or not, meaningful relationships require continual attention. Take a few minutes and think about a satisfying relationship you have with someone, whether it is your spouse, a child, a special companion or a friend. What happens between the two of you to keep your friendship or relationship satisfying?

*List participants' responses on a flip chart, chalkboard or other type of writing board. If the group is larger than 10-15 people, you might want to divide*

*the participants into smaller groups of 3-4 and have each small group give a summary of its discussion. Help the participants summarize and list commonalities between answers. You might think of possibilities before to help facilitate this process. For example, key ideas might include: Make time for each other, listen to each other, give compliments, show your appreciation and fondness, honor each other's dreams—even if you don't have the same dreams—show understanding, share similar values, build pleasant memories, disagree without harming your friendship or relationship, and be respectful to each other even in arguments or disagreements, etc.*

As we look at these responses, it's obvious much effort goes into maintaining satisfying marriages and special relationships. 'Strong friendships' are important in our lives, and they are especially important in marriages and intimate relationships. However, keeping a friendship going in a marriage or with another family member can sometimes be more difficult, and can take more time and attention than with a friend. Let's talk a little more about building friendships with family members.

**Share everyday happenings with each other.** When you talk to a friend in person, on the phone, or through an e-mail message, you may share and listen to each other about the small details of what's happening in your individual lives and how you are feeling about it. The same thing needs to happen in a marriage and with other family members who are close to you. Couples who have lived together for many years may think they know everything there is to know about the other person. However, we are constantly growing and changing, and our reactions to what is happening around us change, too. Unless that is continually shared, a spouse may have no idea a change in the other partner has occurred. Young couples who

have an active and growing family can run into the same problem, thinking they don't have time to share and spend time with their partner. That can be dangerous to a marriage as they may find themselves growing apart and not turning to each other when challenges arise. Having a deep friendship helps us turn toward—rather than away from—a special person during both good and bad times. That is important for long and enduring relationships.

**Listen attentively.** Sometimes, people have to consciously practice how to communicate with another person with whom they want to build or maintain a good relationship. Listening is often more difficult than talking. What are some ways to truly listen to another person who is speaking? **Allow the group to discuss and summarize with the following points: a) Maintain eye contact in a manner culturally appropriate for you; b) lean forward; c) make non-verbal gestures like nodding your head; d) give simple and positive responses; e) do not interrupt even when you disagree or have something to share; and f) show positive expressions, such as reaching out and gently touching the other person on the arm in a non-invasive, comfortable and supportive way.**

Now, turn to someone next to you and decide who will be the speaker and who will be the listener. The speaker should talk about something that happened last weekend, and the other person should listen attentively as I just described. After a few minutes, I will clap my hands and the listener should look away, yawn, lean back, look at your watch, and pay no attention.

**Clap your hands after about one minute. Allow another minute to pass, and then ask the partners to reverse roles. Repeat the same process. This activity should last no more than five minutes.**

Let's talk about this listening activity. When you were the speaker, how did it feel when the listener looked away? How did it feel when you were a non-attentive listener? Why do you think you had these feelings? What would you like most from someone who is listening to you?

**Allow time for discussion on these questions.**

The second part to listening is making sure you understand the message correctly. Simply say to the other person, "Now, let me tell you what I heard you saying, and the feelings you seemed to be expressing. Am I correct?" If not, the speaker can repeat the message with different words

### Ways to PeopleTALK for satisfying relationships

- Share everyday happenings.
- Show fondness and admiration.
- Bring up tough issues 'softly.'
- Avoid using the word 'you' to blame.
- Use 'I' statements to talk about problems.
- Make messages short during disagreements.
- Be respectful even during conflict.
- Agree on rules for difficult discussions.
- Suggest a 'time out' to cool down.
- Calm your body in times of conflict.
- Be willing to compromise.
- Honor each other's hopes and dreams.

until the listener has correctly understood the message and the feelings attached to the message. This is not easy to do if you disagree with the message you heard. It takes patience and determination to hold your opinion until you reverse roles and have the opportunity to be heard.

**Show fondness and admiration.**

It is sometimes much easier to criticize and find fault, rather than recognizing positive qualities about the special people in your life, especially family members. For example, maybe you would like your spouse to help with the housework without being asked. So, you complain repeatedly. In most instances, this will not improve the situation.

John Gottman, from the University of Washington, has studied couples for many years to find out what makes marriages work or end in divorce. He found that expressing fondness, encouragement and admiration toward each other—often in small and unexpected ways—goes a long way in maintaining strong marital relationships. To use this idea with other important people in your life, it may be as simple as thanking your adult daughter for stopping by to see you or giving her an unexpected hug. Gottman says good relationships are maintained when there are five positive interactions for every one negative interaction, a 5:1 ratio.

***Hold up your card where you have written in large print, "5:1." Leave it visible throughout the rest of the meeting.***

**Part II: Managing Differences**

What often harms friendship in a marriage or close relationship is having a very severe problem between the two of you that cannot be resolved and does not go away. Let's focus on marriages right now and talk about four final stages that

can lead to divorce or to living with an unhappy situation.

1. The couple thinks of their marital problems as extremely difficult.
2. Talking together about an issue seems useless. They never make progress in resolving the issue or learning to live with it, so each may try to solve the problem independent of the other. Nothing gets better.
3. Their difficulties pull them away from each other, and they start leading parallel lives, not spending time with each other, not talking to each other in meaningful ways, not showing fondness or being intimate toward the other, nor sharing their everyday lives.
4. They each become lonely and do not reach out to each other in good times and bad. (Gottman & Silver, 1999, pg. 45)

Here are 10 suggestions for two people who are special to each other, but have a serious disagreement that is threatening their relationship.

***Depending on the available time, you can decide which questions and activities you will use and how much time to allow.***

1. Bring up tough issues softly.

When one person wants to bring up a tough issue, bring it up softly at a time that makes sense and by not accusing the other person. For example, if a married couple is having money problems, bringing up the issue on how they use the credit card while one of them is watching a favorite TV program probably is not the right time.

**Suggested questions: What situations can you remember when you or someone else brought up an issue at a very inappropriate time? How did the interaction proceed?**

2. Avoid using the word “you” to blame.

People feel defensive when someone brings up a touchy issue by saying something like, “You never want to go on vacation.”

**Suggested activity: Show the picture you have drawn of the word “You” (within a circle with a line across to symbolically show that it is not allowed in beneficial dialogue).**

3. Use ‘I’ statements to talk about problems.

**Softly** bringing up an issue requires you to say how it affects you without blaming the other person. Example: “When I get no phone calls from you, I feel lonely and sometimes worried because I think maybe I said something to offend you in our last conversation. Or, that something bad has happened to you.”

**Suggested activity: Ask the group to react to the following two messages:**

- a. You never pay attention to me at home. You come in the house and go straight to the TV or call your folks and talk forever. You seem to care more about what is happening to others than what is happening to me. You really make me feel lousy.
- b. We never talk with each other when we get home at night. I get frustrated because I think we are losing touch with each other.

**Follow-up questions: How did you feel when each message was read? What made the difference?**

4. Make messages short during disagreements.

Address only one issue at a time and don’t go on and on. You will lose the opportunity to open a beneficial dialogue if your messages are lengthy and cover many issues. Be alert to ways you can soothe each other during a heated conversation, such as a response like, “I see.” However, you need to know what is soothing to the other person and what will not cause even more irritation.

5. Be respectful even during conflict.

Avoid calling the other person names, being sarcastic, degrading the other person, or bringing up issues of the past as a way to criticize the other person. This behavior is very damaging to a relationship.

6. Agree on rules for difficult discussions.

For example, you may need to agree you will not talk about your daughter loaning money to an old friend when the two of you are discussing paying for her computer classes.

7. Suggest a ‘time out’ to cool down.

If you find a discussion is getting out of control, ask the other person for a “time out” so both of you can calm down and not say things you may regret later. Be sure to set another time for resuming the dialogue **and** work at having positive thoughts about the other person, rather than dwelling on the conflict. You could get yourself more worked up during the “time out” if you

don't force yourself to quit thinking negative thoughts about the other person.

8. Calm your body in times of conflict.

Think about ways your body reacts to conflict (e.g. tight jaw, racing heart, pounding headache, tight neck muscles). Think of methods that work for you in reducing body stress (e.g. opening and closing jaws, deep breathing, walking, stretching neck muscles). Use the techniques that work for you to get your body calmed down during a conflictual situation. As you are calming down, try to have positive thoughts about the other person and the good times the two of you have had in the past. It takes about 20 minutes for the body to resume a normal heartbeat and pulse when it has been stressed out.

***Suggested questions: How does your body react when you have strong, negative emotions? How do you calm your body during stressful situations?***

9. Be willing to compromise.

This should be done in ways you both can accept. This means you have to listen with an open and honest ear to each other's perspective and feelings about an issue. Compromising, and letting the other person influence you, helps to decrease the hurt and pain so the problem doesn't eat away at the relationship. It also helps to develop an understanding and patience with each other's faults.

10. Honor each other's hopes and dreams.

Many problems between two people result from conflicting hopes and dreams that have not been thoroughly discussed. Get inside the other person's world by listening when that person is ready to talk. You may not agree with the hopes and dreams the other person has, but showing you are listening attentively may eventually open the door for more discussion. Prying needlessly, or trying to give advice, will shut off the other person's willingness to share. Being interested in each other's hopes and dreams is often hard work.

***Suggested example to discuss:*** Your adult son wants to start a business of his own, but you know he doesn't have enough financial backing. Your dream is that he will be satisfied with a salaried job. How can a parent show respect and interest in the son's hopes and dreams, even though the parent may think the son is not being realistic?

***Allow a few minutes for discussion. Two key points to summarize the discussion are: 1) listening attentively and respectfully when the son wants to talk about his hopes and dreams; and 2) encouraging dialogue so the two of you can understand each other's point of view which may include an agreement to respectfully disagree.***

### Part III: Helping Others in the Community Build Strong Relationships

What can we do in our community to help and support strong marriages and relationships? After we identify some potential activities, what steps do we need to take to make them happen?

*Discussion will vary with the type of participants and what they feel is important. If you have purchased the booklet “Strengthening Marriages In Your Community: 101 Ideas To Get You Started,” pass it out at this time to guide your discussion. The following suggestions (some taken from the booklet) might help the group begin to identify activities that would work for them.*

- Offer volunteer babysitting to young couples in the community so they might have a “date.”
- Establish a volunteer babysitting bank for working parents who have a sick child.
- Sponsor an essay contest inviting children to write about their parents’ marriage and what it means to them.
- Copy the box titled “Ways to PeopleTALK for Satisfying Relationships” (pg. 3) on card stock paper to make bookmarks, pocket cards or magnets using adhesive magnetic strips. Distribute them at public events.
- Help pass legislation that would require parents who are contemplating divorce, and have minor children, to attend a parent education program before filing.

- Work with other groups to organize relationship classes for couples in different stages of life.
- Ask a local radio station to broadcast a “Tip of the Day” for strengthening marriages.

#### Summary:

Healthy relationships thrive in an atmosphere where each person feels comfortable in talking honestly and openly about important things. In this way, minor issues can be talked about before they become larger issues that can damage the relationship. Just as importantly, a satisfying relationship is about creating shared meaning and having a sense of connection to the other person. It is about spending time with the other person and honoring each other’s hopes and dreams. Everyday ways of respectfully talking and interacting with each other make a difference, too.

William Doherty of the University of Minnesota emphasizes the importance of establishing rituals that connect family members to each other. It can be as simple as saying goodbye in a special way in the morning as family members go their separate ways or making time for each other to share the day’s events after the evening meal. Likewise, friends can establish their own rituals that create a bonding and lasting relationship. Satisfying relationships help create unity among families, friends and communities.

**Thanks to the following persons who reviewed this lesson: Dr. Kathy Bosch, Mary “Peg” Condray, Nancy Peterson and Paula Seele.**

## PeopleTALK: Enhancing Your Relationships Evaluation Form

**Directions:** Please answer the following questions; however, completing this survey is voluntary. You do not have to answer every question. You will not be identified with your answers in any way.

1. How do you rate this lesson?  
Check one: Excellent \_\_\_\_ Good \_\_\_\_ Average \_\_\_\_ Poor \_\_\_\_ No opinion \_\_\_\_
2. Do you think this information will be useful to you in your own life?  
Check one: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_ If yes, how?
3. Do you believe the following statement is true?  
"People can learn how to have fights so that it will not hurt their relationships with others."  
Check one: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
  
Before this program, did you believe this statement? Check one: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
4. Do you believe the following statement is true?  
"Being good friends is necessary for a satisfying marriage or close relationship."  
Check one: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
  
Before this program, did you believe this statement? Check one: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_
5. What did you learn that you did not know or that surprised you?
6. Will you share this information with others?: Yes \_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_  
If yes, who? Check those that apply:  
FCE \_\_\_\_ Other organization \_\_\_\_ Family \_\_\_\_ Friend \_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_
7. A. Are you?: Female \_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_ B. What is your age? \_\_\_\_ C. Are you?:  
Single \_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_ Single, living with partner \_\_\_\_ Separated or divorced \_\_\_\_ Widowed \_\_\_\_  
  
Other comments about the lesson:

**Thank you! Please give this survey to your lesson leader. The information you provided will help us improve family life education.**

### For Leaders Only:

Leader's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ County: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Group: FCE \_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_ Date when lesson was given: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of People attending: \_\_\_\_ Number of Men: \_\_\_\_ Number of Women: \_\_\_\_

Please return completed surveys to your county Family and Consumer Science agent, or mail directly to:

**Charlotte Shoup Olsen, Kansas State University, 343 Justin Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506**

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