

FIGURE E.1 **COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HEALTH WORKER AND MOTHER**



COMMUNICATION

Communication is a two-way information-sharing process that leads to mutual understanding. In this process each person:

- Actively shares his or her thoughts and feelings
- Actively listens and works to understand the other person's thoughts and feelings

Communication can be done in other ways besides talking. You can also communicate or send messages through body language: the way you hold your body, your facial expressions, looking at the person when you talk, and the tone of your voice.

Good communication skills are important in helping health workers successfully interact with mothers and families. When you care for a mother and her newborn, effective communication skills help establish mutual comfort and trust. If the mother is comfortable and feels trust, she will tell you more about herself, her problems, and her needs. She is also more likely to follow your recommendations, which will help ensure that she and her baby receive the best possible care.

Good communication skills help health workers give better care.

Good Communication Skills

Good communication skills are techniques you can use to show the mother or family that you care and respect them and that you want to help. Often health workers give care to many people in one day. They worry that using good communication skills will take more time. If it takes more time, their busy workdays will be even busier. But ask yourself: does it take more time to smile, to make eye contact, to use a gentle voice, to use words the mother understands? Of course not. Instead, using good communication skills will help you to give better care and make the mother feel more comfortable and respected.

Good communication skills also include body language. If you use good body language, others will feel more comfortable and trust you more quickly. It helps a mother to feel more confident in giving you information. However, you must remember every gesture or action you make should be culturally appropriate. Certain gestures may not be interpreted in the same positive manner in every culture. To avoid offending people, learn about what is acceptable body language and adapt your behavior accordingly.

Good communication skills help you receive and give information more completely and effectively. These skills include:

Showing respect

Treat the mother as someone who can understand her baby's health problems and can make good decisions about care.

Not being judgmental

Never blame a woman for her or her baby's problem, cultural practices, or past decisions she has made.

Speaking clearly and using words the mother understands

For communication to happen, what is said needs to be understood by both the health worker and the mother. If possible, speak with the woman in the language with which she is most comfortable.

Listening actively

- Listen to what the mother says and how she says it (tone of voice, choice of words, facial expressions, and gestures).
- Keep silent sometimes. Give the mother time to think, ask questions, and talk. She may find she already knows some of the answers to her problem.
- Listen carefully instead of thinking what you are going to say next.
- Give feedback to show that you have heard what the mother is saying; for example, nod your head, say "yes." This encourages the mother to continue.
- Occasionally rephrase or summarize what the mother has said. Then both you and the mother will know that you have understood.
- Give praise and encouragement for positive behaviors or practices.

Using good body language

- Smile.
- Have eye contact while talking and listening.
- Use a gentle voice.
- Keep your body height at the same level as the mother's.
- If appropriate, touch the mother gently on her arm or shoulder.

Encouraging the woman to voice her concerns and ask questions

- Answer her questions honestly.
- Be sure to ask if she has understood your response and repeat explanations if needed.

Respecting the woman's right to make decisions about her own health care and that of her baby

- It is your responsibility to give the woman all the information she needs to make a decision, not to make the decision for her.

Listening to what the woman has to say

- Give her enough time to tell you what she thinks is important.
- Avoid interrupting her while she is talking.

COUNSELING¹

Good communication skills are an important part of counseling. When you counsel, you talk person-to-person to help someone. Counseling helps a mother decide what to do and how to do it. If you use good communication skills, your counseling will be more effective.

Good Counseling Skills

Make the mother feel welcome

This shows that you care, helps to relax the mother, and builds trust.

- Greet the mother in a friendly and respectful way.
- If the mother or baby will be examined or have a procedure, explain what will happen.
- Provide privacy during the examination, counseling, or a procedure. Make sure others cannot see what is happening or hear what is being said.
- Give reassurance and comfort if needed.
- Encourage the mother to ask questions or voice her concerns at any time during the visit.

Use effective questions

Questions are an important part of counseling. They help you decide what problems or needs the mother or baby have. It is helpful, for example, to find out what she already knows about essential newborn care and if she and her family are currently practicing any positive newborn care behaviors. This will help you identify any problems or needs and will guide you on what and how to counsel.

To ask effective questions:

- Use good communication skills.
- Ask only one question at a time. Wait with interest for the answer.
- Try not to start questions with “Why.” Sometimes “Why” sounds as if you are finding fault.
- Use open-ended questions to encourage a mother to explain her situation. Open-ended questions give the health worker more information. Closed-ended questions require only a “yes” or “no” answer and cut off discussion. For example:
 - [Open-ended question]: “Would you please tell me your reason for coming today?”
 - [Closed-ended question]: “Did you come today because your baby is sick?”
- If the mother does not understand, rephrase the question.

Give useful, correct information

No matter what you are counseling about, the information you give needs to be correct, clear, and useful to the mother

Help the mother and her family make their own choices based on clear information and their own feelings, situation, and needs

After assessing the family’s needs, offer recommendations tailored to each family’s situation and resources. After you give counseling and guidance to a mother or family, they usually decide themselves what they will do. People carry out their own decisions best. This is why good counselors do not make decisions, but help others to make their own decisions. Sometimes you need to be flexible. What you recommend may not be possible in every mother’s situation. When this happens, help her and her family find a solution which works for them.

Help the mother remember what to do

When giving instructions, it helps a mother remember if you:

- Keep instructions short, including the most important points.
- Keep it simple.
- Point out what to remember.
- Give the most important information first.
- Show a picture or give a demonstration as you speak.
- Repeat the information as a summary.
- Ask the person to repeat what you have explained. This helps people remember. Gently correct any information that is missing or incorrect.

Praise the mother for coming and remind her of her next visit

- Giving praise recognizes the mother and her family's efforts toward good health care.
- Encourage her to come for her next appointment or whenever she has a problem or she or her baby experience any danger sign.

Counseling Challenges

Counseling is not always easy. You may have situations where it is hard to know what you should do. Below are some situations you may face, along with suggestions on what to do.

The person is silent

- If the person is silent at the start of the meeting, gently call attention to the silence. You could say, for example: "I can see that it is difficult to talk. It's often that way. I wonder if you are feeling a little worried." Look at the person and use body language that shows empathy and interest. Wait for the person to answer.
- During discussion, silence can be appropriate. Sometimes the person is thinking or deciding how to talk about feelings or thoughts. Give the person time to think.

The person cries

- A person may cry for different reasons: to express sadness, to win sympathy, out of stress or nervousness, or to stop further discussion. Do not assume you know why the person is crying.
- Wait for a while. If the crying continues, say that it is all right to cry; it is a natural reaction. This permits the person to explain the reasons for crying. You may ask the reasons gently.

The counselor cannot see a solution to the person's problem

- Counselors may feel anxious if they are not sure what to advise. You do not have to solve every problem for the person. Express understanding. Sometimes this is what the person really wants. You can also suggest others who could help.

The counselor does not know the answer to a person's question

- Explain honestly and openly that you do not know the answer but together you can find out. Check with a supervisor, a knowledgeable coworker, or reference materials, and give the person the correct answer.

The counselor makes a mistake

- Correct the mistake and say you are sorry. It is important to be correct, but it's not important to look perfect. Admitting a mistake shows respect for the other person.
- Be honest. The more honestly you express your own feelings when appropriate (without revealing your personal life), the easier it is for the other person to do the same.

The person asks a personal question

- In general, try not to talk about yourself. This takes attention away from the other person.
- You do not have to answer personal questions. The relationship between a person and counselor is a professional one, not a social one.