

One in a series of articles by

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## Connecting With Others: **COMMUNICATION AS A POWERFUL FORCE FOR CHANGE**

Any communication model that helps us to consciously choose productive responses instead of resorting to alienating knee-jerk responses is worth exploring.

For many people, our current mode of communication and associated language is often too small for what our hearts long to express. Much of our communication is based on the belief that human beings are inherently ignorant and need to be educated about what's right and wrong and that there are certain people who are qualified to do that job. In the words of Joseph Chilton Pearce "All of us know intuitively that we are not by nature savage beasts. Fewer, however, are aware that we are driven to some fairly beastly behaviours by enculturation, despite the fact that the process itself is supposed to prevent this."

More often than not, when we have differences with others, we end up treating them in ways that are basically dehumanizing. We play the game 'who's right' and say things that alienate us from each other – this interferes with the very thing we most want, which is openness, honesty, and respect with one another when we're interacting. So the combination of our thinking and the way we have been educated to communicate make it very easy for us to see others as enemies when conflict arises. This is such a tragedy especially when people genuinely

want to contribute meaningfully to life.

Through this education, we have developed a very rich vocabulary for telling others what's wrong with them – words like: right/wrong, good/bad, normal/abnormal, appropriate/inappropriate, should/shouldn't, selfish, rude, etc. When we speak in this way, we are applying moralistic judgment –and these words are just as harmful when I use them on myself as when I use them with others. Instead of moralistic judgments, NVC promotes the use value judgments. This means clearly observing other's words or actions and letting them know what needs of ours are not met by it. So instead of saying something like, 'That person is racist or ignorant,' I might say "When I hear that person tell jokes about people from other cultures, I feel discouraged because I really value respect and equality among people regardless of their ethnicity." This approach paves the way for a different kind of dialogue, one that opens doors instead of closing them.

Yet another aspect to our enculturation is the value we place on obedience to authority. We teach our children this message when we use phrases like, "Do as you're told" or by manipulating them using threat of punishment, praise or rewards. Even though it may be coming from a well-meaning place, this way of communicating doesn't nurture the development of personal responsibility or an awareness of needs. So, for example, if I have a five-year-old who is hitting my two-year-old and I go up to her, take her by the arm and say, 'That's bad. We don't hit people. What a naughty thing to do,' that's the beginning of the training right there. Naturally I want to put a stop to the hitting, but I also want to help the child develop an awareness of how their behaviour is not serving anyone's needs nor is it bringing about the results they actually want in the end. I don't want the child to be blindly following orders. I want to help her explore more effective strategies will better meet everyone's needs. In this particular



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case, we'll want to address needs for safety and respect and also offer some understanding to the child around how frustrating it can be when a younger sibling takes our toys ... which does not mean we condone her hitting but that we understand her frustration ... two vastly different things that we don't want to confuse.

The truth is that as long as there are people, there will be differences. Conflict, however, is not the problem. Needs are not the problem. The key is how we choose to resolve conflict. Whenever we have enemy images of others, the likelihood of alienation and violent increases dramatically. If we approach a situation with awareness and curiosity however, we will see each other as humans and find creative ways to resolve differences without resorting to violence and destruction. We have the power. It's up to us.

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