

Conflict Resolution Tool: Communicate Your Feelings & Needs

By Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator for Bellevue College. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

In Honest, Direct, Respectful, Dennis Adams describes a three step process for communicating your needs to others. Marshall Rosenberg's Center for Non-Violent Communication (www.cnvc.org) describes 4 steps. I have merged those processes and other ideas for this tool, which can be used in times of conflict to share your feelings and work toward a mutual resolution.

The script to remember is:

When... I feel... [I need]... I want / wish / wonder...

1. **"When...." Identify the behavior or problem situation:** The more concrete and specific, the better. Do not introduce judgment or evaluation. An easy way to check if this is an "unarguable truth" is to ask: is this something I can feel in my body? See with my eyes? Hear? Would everyone else be able to see the same thing I can "see" right now? Would a video camera see it?
2. **"I feel..." Identify the feeling:** State the emotion (e.g. "I feel sad..." or angry... or scared.) Be careful not to say "I feel like...." because then you may be tempted to say "I feel like you are ignoring me" which is your interpretation of their intent, it is not how *you feel* because of their *behavior*. When you describe your feeling, you take responsibility for it. (We cannot control other people's actions... we *can* and do make choices about how we respond to them.)
 - **"I need..." Identify a core need:** This statement may not always feel necessary. But often underneath a feeling there is a fundamental need that is unmet. Do you need to feel respected? Valued? Safe? In control? Nurtured? Trusted?
3. **Request: Identify something you want, wish, or wonder.**
 - "I want" tells them what action you want (and expect) them to take. Be as specific as you can, and make sure it's something that is possible for them to do. (If your partner says no to this request, explore other approaches to getting this need met.)
 - "I wish" says what you want to happen, without saying they have to do it for you.
 - "I wonder" is a continuation of your feeling statement – it's an attempt to understand their perspective rather than trying to create your own interpretation.

Imagine if you said, in frustration: "You never pick up around the house. I always have to do all the work." That would likely put your partner on the defensive, and it's easy to get into a battle of one-up-manship where you both pull out all your martyr cards about how hard you work and how unappreciated you are. Instead, try: "**When** you leave your piles of clean laundry in the TV room, **I feel** stressed. **I need** our house to feel like someplace I can relax. **I wish** the house was tidier so we could both enjoy our time here together."

This re-frames the situation from antagonists to working together as allies toward a mutual goal.

Let's look at a few more examples.

- Instead of "You don't care about this project – you never respond to me!", try "**When** you don't respond to emails, **I feel** frustrated. **I wonder** if you really want to work on this."
- Instead of "You need to get your act together and be on time", try "**When** you're late to meet me, **I feel** unloved. **I wish** you could be on time or let me know when you're running late."
- Instead of saying "I've told you 1000 times not to leave your shoes all over the house", try "**When** we're late to school because you can't find your shoes, **I feel** frustrated. **I want** you to always take your shoes off and put them on the shelf as soon as we get home, so we can easily find them when you need them."

Re-Write These Sentences

Use the script "When you... I feel... [I need]... I want / wish / wonder..."

To partner: "You never clean the kitchen after you eat breakfast. I'm always stuck doing it."

To child: "I hate it when you stand up in your high chair."

To friend: "You're so rude to people! Why do you act like such a jerk?"

To co-worker: "You say you'll take care of a project, but then it never gets done on time."

Think of a situation (or two) in your life that is bothering you right now. One way to pinpoint unmet needs is to look for recurrent conflicts and chronic complaints. Think about statements you make (out loud or in your head) which start with "you always," "you never", "why can't you", and "why don't you." When you've collected a list of complaints: First, try to think if there is something related to it that this person *is* doing well that you could give them a little appreciation for. Then, transform a complaint into a simple statement about what you see, feel, need, and wish.

I appreciate:

When you...

I feel...

[I need]...

I want / wish / wonder..."