



Communication can help close the gap between one generation and the next.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Why do kids often have difficulty communicating with their parents and vice versa? The age-old answer is because of the “generation gap” — defined as a difference in values and attitudes between one generation and another.

With today’s technologies, such as cell phones, e-mail and blogs — compared to past generations’ telephone party lines and color TVs — the generation gap is very much alive and well.

So how can communication be fine-tuned between generations? It starts with recognizing and understanding that differences exist, suggests Maggie Miller, a University of Nebraska—Lincoln Extension educator based in Seward, Neb.

Miller explains that life experiences directly affect the way people think, act, respond and work. Thus, each generation tends to see the world a little differently when it comes to family, religion, politics, social roles and finances.

Distinct differences

As an example of the differences among generations, Baby Boomers (individuals who were born between 1943 and 1960)

were influenced by civil rights, the beginning of advanced technology, space travel and assassinations that occurred during that time. They also saw their parents work very hard.

As a result, those experiences shaped Baby Boomers’ values to include optimism, growth and development, and a desire for some personal gratification. Baby Boomers also saw what they didn’t have growing up was attainable to them through work, so they tend to be workaholics, Miller says.

In contrast, GenX’ers (those born from 1961 to about 1981) have often been nicknamed the “generation of rebellion.” During this time period there was the fall of the Berlin Wall, Desert Storm, and a burst of technology including computers and credit cards. GenX’ers also saw their parents as workaholics who had little time for their family. The resulting values for this generation include self-reliance, independence, material things, a proficiency in technology, and a desire for informality and fun away from work.

Miller emphasizes that there is no “right” or “wrong” from one generation to the next. Instead, she says, we need to recognize

generational differences exist and use that knowledge to understand behaviors and enhance communication.

She says a common mistake is to see other generations from our own value points, but we need to be willing to see them from their values and viewpoints as well. For instance, Miller says, “Thoroughness and exactness means something different to someone from a generation who values tradition versus someone from a generation that values fun and informality.”

She adds, “Every generation has problem-solving skills — just different means of doing it.”

Finding middle ground

To close the generation communication gap, Miller cites following the golden rule put forth by author Stephen Covey: “Seek first to understand and then to be understood.” In essence, be respectful of generational differences that will likely exist, and be proactive about coming up with solutions to those differences. Here are some strategies for finding the middle ground.

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1. Talk about your generational differences. For example, a common sticking point between today's father-son pairs is that "Dad" is from the Baby Boomer generation and has a work first mind-set. Meanwhile, the "son" is a GenX'er who values a balance between work and having fun in life.

As a result, Dad may expect working weekends, while the son believes Saturday and Sunday are for time off.

Miller says that by recognizing this difference in expectations exists, it can be discussed, and an agreeable solution can be found rather than the dad and son harboring resentment toward each other because of their different values.

2. Don't expect perfection. This advice is

really for the older generation in their expectations toward their children. Marcie Moran, a Sioux Falls, S.D.-based psychologist, says high expectations are difficult for the next generation to live up to — and it is something they rarely outgrow. She has met many adults who still feel their parents disapprove of them and their life or career choices.

"We have to practice having fewer expectations and making less judgments toward the younger generation," Moran says. "This doesn't mean we should have low expectations for our children, it just means we shouldn't demand perfection."

She adds, "Think about what you want your relationship to be when your children

are 25, 30 or 40. Wouldn't you rather be an adult friend who they love to spend time with? It's a wonderful thing to achieve that relationship with your child, so don't be too critical as they are growing up."

3. Set aside competitive feelings. Miller points out that there is often a tug-of-war when two different generations work together. The younger generation often comes with new ideas, while the older generation wants to be valued and appreciated for what they've worked for. In short, the new generation wants to distinguish themselves from the previous generation, while the older generation wants to be admired and emulated for their accomplishments.

As a result, many multi-generation family farms and businesses experience tension and hard feelings, never getting past that competition, Miller says.

To move beyond that stage, Miller says communication needs to be a two-way street. For instance, in father-son work arrangements, the son should tell his father, "I appreciate what you've worked for." Likewise, the dad needs to tell his son, "I'm proud of you."

4. Maintain family traditions. Today's generation may not value family traditions like past generations did. But Moran says maintaining family gatherings each year is still essential across the generations.

"This doesn't mean you always do the

same thing, the most important part is getting everyone together at a holiday or certain time of year," Moran says.

She adds, "The way you keep a family together is you get together; you see each other. Make it happen. If you don't have social relations between parents and

siblings, it won't continue. You have to work hard at it."

She adds, "Family relationships are a struggle. Nobody is without it. That's simply part of human relationships."



Defining the generations

A generation is considered about a 20-year time span. Generations from the past to present include:

- ▶ The traditional or mature generation dating from about 1901 to 1942
- ▶ The Baby Boomers born between 1943 and 1960
- ▶ Generation X, or GenX'ers, born between 1961 and 1981
- ▶ The Millennial generation born between 1982 and 2003

Editor's Note: For more information about the role of each generation in history, consider reading *The Fourth Turning* by William Strauss and Neil Howe, available at www.amazon.com.