

Water Buffalo

communication

IT WAS NOVEMBER and we were making the final preparations for our first ever SwampFest, a one-of-a-kind festival at Playcard Swamp, which grew to be attended by as many as seven thousand people. The festival was scattered over eighty acres of pristine land that included a livestock barn, a huge garden, hay fields, enchanting forests, and the black water of the Playcard Swamp, teeming with gators and water moccasins (cottonmouth)—certainly not your usual stroll in the park. Believe it or not, there isn't a better place for a party than in a swamp.

Over the years of teaching hands-on science at Playcard, I had taken people into the swamp by canoe to help me hang wood duck boxes, identify plants and trees, do water quality samples, and just go exploring. From the experiences I already had under my belt in that swamp, I had a feeling that it was

too dangerous to turn “city slickers” loose without supervision during our upcoming SwampFest. But I realized that I had lost that battle when I saw a member of the board haul in four canoes for the festival participants to use. All I could do was pray for their safety and hope for the best.

As with any large event, the show day starts early. We were there at sunup and soon thereafter the other event volunteers arrived. Local farmers started filing into the barn, bringing their newborn animals for the children to see and touch.

One volunteer was gathering all the supplies for the rocket launch and putting new batteries in the bullhorn so that the kids could hear his instructions for the competition. Other volunteers were drawing out the ring for the turtle race and bullfrog jumping contest in the sandy ground. The oxen were being unloaded and harnessed for their day of pulling a wagon full of laughing children. Some of our Native American friends were spreading their deer hides and hanging the dream catchers over the doorway of the round hut, while others started a fire in the center of the Native American village, preparing to cook a delicious venison stew. Facilitators came from all over to set up their activities for the children of Horry County that day.

The problem was that everyone coming to the festival didn't *know* our swamp and that made for, well, a rather dangerous opportunity of fun and learning.

The morning wasn't too far under way when a volunteer came running up to me saying that a Playcard board member had also ordered a large water buffalo to be delivered, and now the delivery men wanted to know where to unload it.

My first thought was, “Great . . . now you tell me.” In preparation for SwampFest's debut, we had been working with

FFA students for the past several *months* building pens to house the influx of turkeys, donkeys, calves, ponies, miniature horses, oxen, guineas, goats, pigs, and so on that were scheduled to attend the party. Even with great pens, new animals on a farm can cause problems. Cockey Locky, our red bantam rooster had almost been killed by a visiting tom turkey just a few days prior to the event, and the blood on my hat proved it!

I told the volunteer that we did not have a pen ready to contain a water buffalo. And running through my mind were images of my recent, too-close-for-comfort experience with another water buffalo. My sister Libby had invited our family to one of those safari experiences outside of Atlanta where you ride in your car through fields of wild animals, taking in the scenery and, at times, getting closer than you'd like to the exhibits. Birney was driving, Tyler and Lauren were in the back seat, and I was soaking in all the exotic animals from the front seat of our station wagon. At first, it was a great experience. Then, the kids started fussing. I turned around to help Lauren, then five years old, get a snack out of the cooler. With my head near the floorboard of the back seat, I didn't see the animals getting closer to the car, and no one bothered to mention it. When I turned back around to face forward, I was about two inches away from the slobbery mouth of a water buffalo. I screamed! Birney started laughing and encouraged me to pet him or at least greet our visitor in a more polite manner. He was absolutely huge, and I was scared to death. That's when seven-year-old Tyler thought he'd be helpful and try to make the water buffalo move back out of the car. He picked up something in the back seat, reached out his window, and slapped the water buffalo on the hindquarters. The mad buffalo started kicking our station wagon in a raging

frenzy. I thought it was all over for me. Somehow the water buffalo managed to get his enormous horns back out through my window without killing me in the process. I had never been so happy to drive away—alive—in all my life.

That was it for me. I already wanted nothing else to do with water buffaloes, and now they were unloading one for our first SwampFest. I gave strict orders to the volunteer to not let them unload it until I had a chance to talk with James Blanton, the owner of the barn. The volunteer could hear the fearful intensity in my voice and knew I was serious.

After looking all over and then calling his wife, I finally tracked Mr. Blanton down. He was at the doctor's office.

"M'am, this is an emergency," I pleaded with the receptionist. "Please let me talk with Mr. Blanton." She also could hear my intense cry for help, and after a few seconds on hold, Mr. Blanton came to the phone. He agreed that they had to wait until he got there so that he could build a sturdy pen before they unloaded the water buffalo. In the meantime the men who brought the water buffalo kept sending the festival volunteer to ask me for an answer to their question—"what is the hold up?" I refused to go out and talk with them; my nerves were already shot with the thought of having that thing at our first event. I decided that Mr. Blanton could be the one to handle the buffalo when he arrived, not me.

Mr. Blanton arrived about forty-five minutes later with materials from his hardware store heavy enough for a pen. He had been rushing around so much, building the contraption as fast as possible, that he was about out of breath when he said, "Where is the water buffalo? The pen is built. Let's go unload him."

We followed the volunteer over to where the buffalo was waiting to be unloaded. I walked behind Mr. Blanton, taking precaution this time to keep my body as far away from the buffalo's horns as possible. As we got closer, the volunteer introduced us to four men in National Guard military uniforms who were, I'm sure at this point, tired of waiting. The water buffalo they had brought turned out to be a water tank for festival visitors to use for drinking purposes. There was no two-thousand-pound beast to be found. Needless to say, I was embarrassed. Mr. Blanton could not stop laughing. He had just run out of a doctor's exam for the placement of a water tank!

Whenever people in Horry County wanted to introduce me with a good laugh, they always had a way of remembering this story. For me, the start of our SwampFest adventures began with a lesson well learned—the art of communication is well worth developing.



TAKE A MINUTE TO MUSE . . .

Good communication makes life a whole lot easier. Learning to listen, understand, articulate your thoughts clearly, and assure comprehension by your listener is often easier said than done. Certainly, it is a skill to pass on to our children as young as possible.

Many of our communication errors stem from not taking the time to be sure what we heard was actually what the communicator was intending to say. If only I had taken the time to understand before I jumped to conclusions—a water tank and a water buffalo are two entirely different scenarios! (“Water buffalo” is the military term for a water tank.)

The same can be true with our spouse and children. Many family conflicts can be avoided by taking the time to truly hear and understand what our spouse and children are saying or *meaning to say* through their words.

Think about your recent conversations with your spouse and children.

- What are some of the moments when you knew you hit the bull’s-eye with your communication—your children felt heard, understood, valued, and loved?
- What components of your communication made those experiences so successful?
- How might you apply those components to the current conversations you’re having?
- Have you hit any communication glitches recently?
- Are there any communication “messes” you need to clean up between yourself and your children? Teaching them not only how to communicate well but also how to restore the relationship when a communication error occurs is just as valuable.

Remember, the goal of communication within a family is not to agree; it is to understand. So often we fight to convince each other to see life exactly the way we do that we fail to honor the perspective the other person has—especially a child’s perspective—thereby belittling the other person’s feelings, opinion, and viewpoint.

- Instead, how can you show your spouse or children that your love is bigger than having to agree on everything you discuss?

- How will you focus your priority on understanding each other and making sure each member of your family *feels understood* this week?
- How will honoring your child's perspective and seeking to understand her viewpoint build her self-confidence and self-worth, even when you don't agree?



CREATE YOUR OWN FOREVER WILD EXPERIENCE . . .

(Appropriate for toddlers and up)

Can you think of an animal that can communicate without using its mouth? It rubs its wings together very fast and creates high sounding chirps. You guessed it—a cricket!

Here's a fun game you can play with your children. First, divide into two teams, one parent and child paired up together against the other parent-child pair. Next, decide how you will each communicate to each other without using your mouths: hitting sticks or rocks together, clapping your hands—you get the idea. The parent will be blindfolded and, using your chosen method of communication, both of you will “call” back and forth to each other until the parent successfully finds the child. The game begins with both parent and child leaving the place where they were and going to a location where they can't see each other. Blindfolded parents, begin “calling” your babies!

(Appropriate for middle school and up)

Here's another fun adventure that's great for an outdoor birthday party or with some other group of people. If you've never been turkey hunting, you don't know what fun you're

missing! Turkey hunters have the best camouflage equipment and face paint of them all. And you can experience the fun without actually going hunting. Pick up a few turkey callers from your local outdoor store, or go to www.nwtf.org (National Wildlife Turkey Federation) for great resources. Before you start, get familiar with the turkey calls and learn to mimic the sound of the wild birds. Once you sound like a turkey, you're ready to play.

First, choose one child or parent to dress up in camouflage and hide in the woods—playing the role of the tom turkey. Next choose one other parent or child dressed in camouflage to hide in the woods and play the role of the hen. Give the turkey callers to the “tom” and the “hen.” While they go hide in the woods, the rest of the people should close their eyes and listen to nature's sounds. Give the turkeys about ten minutes or enough time to hide. Then the “tom” and the “hen” will call back and forth four times, while the group of people searches through the woods trying to find them. If the group can't find them before the fourth call, the turkeys win the game.