

## Getting the Conversation Started

I'm sure you are all eager to hear about your child's day when they get home from school. One of the frustrations that I hear from parents is that they can't get any information from their children about their day. The typical response to questions about school may be "nothing", "fine", or "good"- not even a full sentence. So as we start this school year, I thought it might be a good idea to give you some tricks and helpful hints to open the communication lines with your child and get them on the road to sharing and talking.

Most children have admitted that they have responded with "nothing" at some point when asked what they did during the day. Some children say that they don't like to be questioned all the time (feels like they are getting "grilled"). Others say they are not sure what they are supposed to talk about and/or can't find anything to say. Many children simply say they are tired and don't feel like talking as soon as they got home. Several children seem to be interested in getting to their next activity and don't want to "waste time" talking. One child once told me that school is so difficult for him that he'd rather talk about more fun, enjoyable things.

In general, some children are not as eager to share information, while others don't stop talking about their day, feelings, and needs. Even within the same family, some children are better verbal communicators. Different children are comfortable talking at different times and under different circumstances and you need to experiment with different times and places to see what works best for your child. As my students have expressed, sometimes the best time to talk may not be directly when they come home from school.

Personally, for my oldest child, he loves to talk at night in his bed (partly because he is most relaxed and partly I think because it buys him extra time before he has to go to sleep). He's also more likely to talk when doing something physically active, like if we're having a baseball catch. My middle son talks the most when other kids are involved in the conversation or during car rides when he doesn't feel like the pressure is on him. Alleviating direct eye contact somehow seems to make him feel more free to express himself. Sometimes when he's playing with Legos, he is also very calm and relaxed and opens up naturally. My daughter is one of those that will talk anytime and anywhere. We all sometimes wish she would just stop talking! The one thing I find that gets all of them to open up is when I share experiences of mine from when I was younger. They often want to relate their similar experiences and question me about what I did in the same situation.

Here are some general guidelines to increase the likelihood that your child will share information with you:

- **Don't** try too hard, demand, and push for information. This will only backfire. The more you force, the more they will resist. Sometimes it's best to honor silence and show children that you will be patient and allow them to share when they are ready.

- **Don't** rush to fix their problems. Many times as parents we feel the need to rush in and give them advice to solve a conflict that they may divulge. However, many times children just want a sympathetic ear.
- **Don't** be judgmental. If they feel you are judging or criticizing their actions, they may shut down and be less likely to open up to you in the future. No child wants to feel like they have disappointed their parents. So be careful not to make, "you should have..." types of comments.
- **Don't** try to get your child to discuss a sensitive situation in front of other family members or friends. Respect your child's privacy and you will get much more information from them.
- **Don't** interrupt children when they are trying to tell you something. If you interrupt their thoughts, they will feel like you're not listening. Likewise don't answer a phone or text while your children are talking to you. Children have a difficult time focusing and staying on topic as it is without external distractions.
- **Do** model your own feelings. Talk about situations that are upsetting to you so that feelings are viewed as something that can be discussed. You can then share ways that you calm yourself and deal with your feelings. For example, you might say something like, "I was so upset about that situation that I went to take a walk in the park", or "after I cried about it I felt better".
- **Do** ask specific, open ended questions. For example, ask them about their favorite time of the day and their least favorite thing that happened during the day. Ask who they sat next to during lunch, or what game they played at recess.
- **Do** play games to increase communication. For example, you can play a quick true/false game where they have to tell you three things about their day and you have to guess which one thing was true and which ones were false.
- **Do** help your child to identify their emotions by saying things like, "you look like something is upsetting you today". Reflect what your child might be feeling by saying something like, "you must have missed your best friend since she wasn't in school today".
- **Do** offer information about what you've heard other children feeling to get your child to open up. For example you can say, "I heard that a lot of the children in fifth grade were worried that their trip was going to be cancelled. Were you worried about this too?"

It is important that the lines of communication are open between you and your child. The foundation for communication that you establish early on in the elementary school years will create the basis for a lifetime of sharing and trust. Children need to know that they can go to their parents when they need advice or just want to vent. We must make ourselves physically and emotionally available to our children so that we can connect with them in a meaningful way to make them most resilient. As with everything, there is no secret that works for all kids to get them to open up and communicate. The trick is to discover what works best for your child, and I hope that this posting will give you several different strategies to choose from.

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