

Listening So Our Kids Will Talk

Focus on the Family Single Parent Magazine

Studies show that stay-at-home moms spend about 30 minutes a day conversing with their kids, and mothers who work outside the home spend fewer than 11 minutes. Now if we assume that half of that time the parent is doing the talking, listening time drops to 15 minutes for the stay-at-home mom and 5.5 for the mothers who work outside the home. 1 I've always been taught that as long as I'm talking, I'm not learning. If I want to be a good student of my child – to understand his innermost thoughts, feelings, desires and struggles - I need to listen to what he is saying. However, there is one key ingredient to being a good listener – the child has to talk!

Listening is no easy task. You have to tune in with your ears, direct your eyes, respond with your lips, and engage your heart. You must also use your mind to cultivate conversation by asking good questions. Notice I said good questions.

Jesus was a master of asking poignant questions. He is referred to as a healer and teacher, but He was also an active listener. He asked questions of lawyers, invalids, mothers, politicians, fishermen, rabbis, demons, a blind man, Roman officers, a leper, and the disciples. In the Sermon on the Mount alone, He asked fourteen questions. He asked the woman caught in adultery, "Where are your accusers?" He asked the scribes, "Why are you thinking evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk?'" Obviously, since Jesus is omniscient, He knows everything. He did not ask questions to gather information. He used questions to get people to think, and many times to help them come to their own logical conclusions. We can use questions in the same way with our children.

Robert C. Crosby in his book *Now We're Talking! Questions That Bring You Closer to Your Kids*, notes that "questions are one of the most effective yet perhaps most under used tools in a parent's tool box today. Just five minutes of expressing interest in your child will do more to build your relationship with him or her than five months of trying to get him or her interested in you." 2 This echoes the old adage, to be interesting, you must be interested.

Mrs. McVey was a grandmother who complained to my husband that her two grandchildren showed very little interest in her. They never came by to visit or called to see how she was doing. Curious, Steve took Mrs. McVey by to visit the twosome. Sure enough, when they answered the door, they weren't very excited to see her, but dutifully gave her a hug and invited her in. They all quietly sat in the room – the grandmother waiting for the ungrateful kids to show a little love and respect, and the kids waiting for the visit to be over.

That's when Steve decided to try a little experiment by asking the youngest boy some questions.

"Peter, how's baseball going this year?"

"Fine," he answered.

"Who's your best hitter?" Steve asked.

"Joe, he's really good," Peter answered with a tiny ray of enthusiasm.

"I heard you had a double play the other day. What happened?"

With that, Peter began to warm up. His countenance changed from boredom to enthusiasm. He became so chatty that Steve could hardly fit a word in edgewise. Peter was talking about his two favorite subjects: baseball and himself.

The conversation was uphill from there with Steve asking great leading questions and the kids telling him everything he wanted to know about their lives. They didn't want him to leave. Steve was "cool" because he was interested in them and they knew it. Their grandmother could have been dubbed "the coolest grandma around" had she shown interest in her grandchildren, instead of expecting them to be interested in her. Kids don't work that way.

All mothers of adolescents have had this conversation with their children: "How was your day at school?" "Fine."

"What did you do?"

"Nothin'."

"Do you have much homework?"

"No."

If you have ever grown frustrated with this monosyllabic lingo, maybe it's not the answers that are the problems, but the questions that need some improvement.

There are two types of questions: closed and open. A closed question is one that can be answered with one word: "Good," "Bad," "OK," "Yes," "No." "Did you have a good day?" "Did you like your dinner?" "Was the math test hard?" These are conversation stoppers and it's hard to listen if no one is talking.

An open question is one that draws the person out. "What was the best thing that happened at school today?" "Who did you sit with at lunch?" "If you could do anything for God, and money were no object, what would that be?" As your child begins to talk, you need to "complete the loop" with follow through questions showing that you are tuned in and want to know more.

After one of my son's basketball games we went over the game play by play on the ride home.

"Did you see Anthony's three point shot? That was awesome!" I commented.

"Can you believe that guy elbowed me and the Ref didn't call a foul? That made me hot!"

"Yeah! I saw that. It was a cheap shot, but I'm proud of you for not losing your temper. That would have been hard for me. You did a great job blocking that #23 in the third quarter. Which one of the guys was the hardest to cover?"

Notice that I didn't use this time to "coach" him in what he could have done better. This is probably one of the biggest mistakes parents make as they talk to their kids after such events. Would you want someone

to tell you how to do something better and point out all your weaknesses? I know I wouldn't. If that is what happens on your car ride home, expect some quiet passengers. As a matter of fact, don't be surprised if your little Johnny wants to ride home with his friend Charley and his cool mom who asks great questions and points out each player's awesome moves.

Questions draw people in. They are an invitation to relationship.

One of my friends was alone with her son on a trip. The radio was playing and her son reached over and turned it off. "Mom, let's just talk a while," he said. If this happened to you, (talk about being blessed!) what would you say?

Here are a few great questions to get you started.

- What do you think heaven looks like?
- What does Dad do at work?
- Who is a person you know that seems the most Christ-li
- What do you think your wife (husband) will be like?
- If you were going to spend one year on a desert island and could only take three things with you what would they be?
- Who is your favorite aunt or uncle and why do you like him or her so much?
- What sounds and smells do you think Joseph and Mary experienced in the stable on Christmas night? What is the nicest thing I ever did for you?
- When is a time that I hurt your feelings?
- When is a time that you were really mad at m
- If people followed the Golden Rule, think of all the things we wouldn't need. Can you make a list?
- If you could be in a movie that you've already seen, which one would it be? Would you be a character that is already in the movie, or would you be one that you would add?
- What is the hardest part about being (fill in your child's age) ?
- What has been your favorite childhood memory?
- When you pray, how do picture God?
- What is your favorite Bible verse? Why do you like it?
- If you could be an animal for a day, which one would you be?
- If you could go in a time machine, what era in history would you like to visit?
- What person in history would you like to visit?
- What is the most important decision you will ever make?

Of course the list is endless – and that's the best part. Strengthen your arsenal of questions by coming up with your own list. Remember, there's a difference between inquiring to get to know your child and interrogating to solve a crime. Check your attitude and your motives. It will make the difference between meaningful conversation or defensive reactions.

How are you doing in listening to your child?

See if you can answer the following questions.

- Who has been your child's favorite teacher?
- What's the most hurtful thing anyone has ever said to him or her?
- What does he or she fear most about going to high school? College?
- What are his or her friends like?
- Who is his or her best friend?
- Who does he or she admire most?
- What is his or her favorite music group?

If you struggled to answer those questions, it's never too late to start learning. I recently saw a book titled *Talking So People Will Listen*. But when it comes to parenting, I think we need to listen so our kids will talk!