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Communicating with School-Age Children

Not long ago, a  **Photo of small children playing in a classroom** friend asked me

if my career as a communications consultant ever shed any light on the everyday conversations between parents and children. While I typically work with adults in complex business settings, I started paying attention in the playground and soccer side-lines. As I listened to other families—and my own—I witnessed parents making the same communications mistakes over and over. And some of them were quite subtle. Do things ever become tense when you talk with your elementary-school age child? Ever feel like you are not getting the full story? Read on—

“Tell me about your day, honey.” Nearly all of the parents I know complain that their children are often tight-lipped about what happens at school...“I learn everything from her friends because she won’t tell me a word.” If this is your experience, rethink how you are asking in the first place. Ask discrete, fact-based questions: “Tell me one thing you studied in class today” or “Who did you play with at recess?” These questions are far more likely to generate a useful response than more general questions.

“The other kids make fun of me!” A friend recently confided that her 10 year-old daughter was distraught after being teased about her weight. My smart friend asked her daughter what “being fat” meant to her. “If you’re fat, Mom,” she said, “you’re clumsy.” Aha! By clarifying her daughter’s understanding of the attack—athletic prowess rather than a beauty contest—she was able to provide much better support to her child. Lesson from my smart friend? Make sure you understand how your kids interpret the words and stories they tell.

“So what would be the first thing to do?” Do you ever feel like your child simply cannot hear requests that you make of them? That you have to ask them several times to do the same thing? Next time you have a request—especially for a multi-step task—follow-up by asking the child to articulate the first steps. Or have them tell you what the finished product will look like: “So what will mean that you have really finished cleaning your room?”

“Really? Why?” If your child expresses a feeling or opinion, encourage them to give you their thinking behind it. You may need to be really specific with those follow-up questions: “What makes you say that math is hard? What happened that made your day only okay?” Not only will you get more information, but this is an excellent exercise to help kids learn the relationship between viewpoints and supporting information. .” Let your kids know when you are telling them something they are not going to like. Just like adults, kids are helped with words and phrases that characterize the underlying message: This is complicated, this is boring but important, you think you know this but you will see there is something new here.

“This is complicated so let’s really talk about it...”

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“Why do you think that boy is crying?” Emotions are often difficult to discuss—for everyone. Find opportunities to get kids talking about how they feel by using stand-ins. If you see a little girl laughing her head off at the park, ask your child what might be making her so happy. A little boy hugging his dad? “Why do you think he is hugging him?” This approach tends to be all the more revealing to the extent the child is a similar age to your own.

“I don’t know....” Do not accept cop-out answers like “I don’t know” or “I like all of them.” While there are times that these responses from your child mean what they are saying, often they are ways to say, “I don’t want to think about this very hard.” In those cases, consider responding with, “Oh, I bet if we thought about it together we could figure it out” or “Well, tell me a reason that you like one in particular....”

Be discreet. As I was listening to families, one of the biggest problems was that I simply heard too many conversations that, well, I just shouldn’t have been able to hear. Kids know when they can be overheard and will be less forthcoming in that scenario. When it comes to discipline conversations, unless other people are specifically meant to be included, talk in private. In practice, this can be challenging.

This is certainly not a comprehensive list. But from someone who works in communication—and spent a week listening to parents and kids—I give you these thoughts as a start. And I wish you many happy, honest, forth-coming conversations with the children in your life!

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