

## The Art of Conversation

Family life is so busy! There's school and all that comes with it – homework, after-school activities, evening meetings and performances, and then there's work and the house and groceries and laundry. Given how busy you all are, you may think this is a totally ridiculous question, but I'll ask anyway: **When is the last time you had a real conversation with your child or each of your children?**

Before you answer that question, let's define what a "conversation" is. According to Webster's Dictionary, **a conversation is a spoken exchange of opinions, thoughts and feelings.** That definition implies that both people must be talkers as well as listeners and that those roles are shared during the conversation. So, now that we're clear on the definition, when is the last time you had a conversation with your child?

Our Assets survey reveals that only 28% of Arlington teens report having positive communication. One of the questions the survey asks teens to determine whether they are experiencing positive family communication is about having good conversations with their parents. More than half of Arlington teens do not agree with the statement "I have lots of good conversations with my parents." Perhaps, if we start to consider how to have good conversations with our elementary school children, we can continue to develop those skills in our families as our children grow through the teen years.

One barrier to having good conversations might be that we assume we *are* having good conversations. After all, it seems like we're always talking with our children – even when we're trying to talk to someone else! But when we talk to our children, is it a conversation? Are thoughts and opinions being exchanged? Many times what we're saying to our children is not a conversation; it's taking care of business. "Is your homework done? Do you have your lunch money? Who is going to pick-up who when? What time is practice?" Those questions and answers are **not** conversations. They are the family business exchanges essential to running a family. The problem comes when we confuse those "business exchanges" with real conversations and then assume that, of course we're having good conversations with our children – we talk all the time! In our hurry-up, over-scheduled, crazy world, time seems to be our most precious commodity and important things have a way of getting lost in the shuffle unless we make a real effort to deliberately fit them in to our busy lives. Conversation may be one of those important things getting lost. So, how can we fit conversations back into our family lives – and why should we try?

The "why" is quite clear. As human beings we are all hard-wired to connect. Research is showing that parent-child connectedness is a "super-protector" feature of family life that may help buffer children from the many challenges and risks they face in our modern world. But that connectedness has to be mutual and sustained over time. Making time for good conversations is one way to sustain connectedness. The "how" is a bit more complicated.

The tricky part about having conversations with your children is that if we don't schedule a conversation, then it never seems to happen. But if all our conversations are scheduled, they can seem a little contrived or artificial – to parents and children alike. So

how do we find a balance? Try a few of these ideas and see what might work for your family.

- Try to eat a meal together but don't use that time to talk about family business and logistics. Instead talk about the world around you, books, movies, current events, or new computer games. Or talk about the fun things you all have done together over the summer or things you want to do this fall.
- In her book, The Shelter of Each Other, Rebuilding our Families, Mary Pipher talks about the importance of "bedtalk". Often children find it easier to talk about their day in the dark as they're starting to relax. Try to make the time for bedtalk with each of your children.
- Use what you see on TV shows as conversation starters. But remember, there's a big difference between a lecture and a conversation. As parents, you're trying to encourage an **exchange** of thoughts and opinions, not simply impose your thoughts and opinions.
- Take advantage of every opportunity for conversation. Sometimes the best conversations are not planned – they just happen while you're driving your child somewhere or doing the dishes or waiting for the bus. To keep those spontaneous conversations going for a few minutes, Ron Taffel, author of Parenting by Heart suggests that you not "pounce" immediately on a conversation your child has started because your rapt attention can be overwhelming to your child and stop the conversation cold.
- Even though baseball cards or Minecraft or whoever replaced the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles may not be very interesting to most parents, taking a few minutes to ask about the things that fascinate your child can lead to a wonderful conversation.
- Conversations do not need to be long to be meaningful. What's important is the exchange, so don't forget to listen as much as you talk!

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