

Does this sound familiar to you?

Parent: "Hi! How was your day?"

Child: "OK"

Parent: "Did you do anything fun?"

Child: "Not really"

Try as you might, it is hard to get more than one-word responses out of most children. You may find yourself wondering just what exactly your child was doing all day while you were gone. As a parent, I have been through this with both my children (especially my son). Here are some tips to help open communication between you and your child:

GIVE YOUR CHILD TIME TO UNWIND

Children are like us—they need some time to unwind before they are ready to talk about their day with you. Make sure to give your child that time to relax, have a snack, and maybe even play for awhile before you start asking about his or her day.

ASK QUESTIONS THAT REQUIRE REAL ANSWERS

A yes/no question will almost always generate a yes/no answer. Ask questions in such a way that your child has to respond with a sentence. For example: "What did you play at recess today?"; "What was the best part of the story your teacher read to you today?"; "What was the best thing that happened today?"; "What was the worst thing that happened today?" Avoid asking 'why' as that can come across as judgmental, especially with older children.

ASK QUESTIONS IN SUCH A WAY THAT YOUR CHILD HAS TO RESPOND WITH A SENTENCE.

GET TO KNOW YOUR CHILD'S FRIENDS

When you are able to talk about your child's friends and classmates, it is easier for your child to open up. You may ask, "How does Austin feel about his baby brother?" "Who did



you sit next to during art today?" "How did Kaitlyn do at soccer practice today?"

USE HUMOR

Young children love to feel like they are "teaching" adults. We can use that to our advantage and say things like: "Let's see, you got to school and the first thing you did was take a nap..." "You didn't take a nap first? What did you do?" "Oh, so you had center time first. What center did you pick?" or, "So you had liver and broccoli for lunch today..." "You didn't? What did you have?"

TEACH YOUR CHILD CONVERSATION SKILLS

Children learn how to do things by watching adults. The more you can model good conversation skills, the better. You can do this by sharing your day with your children and showing them the types of things you would like them to share with you. Things like, "This morning I went to ____ and did _____. It was hard work, but I had fun," or, "I had to work on a report today and I finished it! That makes me feel really good." Children also need to learn that eye contact, body language and tone of voice are all important when talking with people.

BE AVAILABLE WHEN YOUR CHILD WANTS TO TALK

It can be very hard to drop what you are doing and focus completely on your child's question, but how you respond is crucial to building communication. Your children need to know that they can count on you to talk when they need to. If you absolutely can't break away, tell your child, "I really want to give my full attention to what you are saying because I know it is important. Unfortunately I am in the middle of making dinner now. Can we set aside some time before bed so I can really focus on you?"

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JUST LISTEN

As tempting as it is, when your child opens up to you about a problem he or she is having, don't jump in with answers or solutions. Children need a chance to figure out their own solutions, which is how they develop confidence and competence. When you can reflect their feelings, just LISTEN, and help brainstorm solutions, your children will find you more useful to talk to—and they're more likely to seek you out when they have problems.

WHEN YOUR CHILD OPENS UP TO YOU ABOUT A PROBLEM, DON'T JUMP IN WITH ANSWERS OR SOLUTIONS.



CONNECT WITH YOUR CHILD

Try to find some one-on-one time each day (or as often as possible) with your child. With 7-year-olds it may be working on a puzzle together; with 9-year-olds it may be playing basketball or cuddling on the couch while they watch TV; with teens you may share a ritual of having a cup of tea before bed each night. Children often wait for these routine times with their parents to bring up something that is bothering them.

STAY AVAILABLE

Nothing makes kids clam up faster than feeling pressed to talk. Kids talk on their time and will open up to you if you have proven to be available for them and a good listener.

USE INDIRECT COMMUNICATION

Kids often open up more in situations in which eye contact is limited. Capitalize on these situations—in the car, while on a walk, or at bedtime when it is dark—and see if you can get a conversation started.

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