**Aha! Parenting**

**Foolproof Strategies for Getting Kids to Talk**

*"Most families tend to rush through dinner, especially the kids. They can't wait to get back to their computers and cell phones and iPods.* ***But they'll stick around if the conversation is interesting.*** *And the biggest determinant is YOU. If you see yourself and your life as a crashing bore, your kids will see the same thing. But if you see your life as an endless succession of miraculous and fascinating events, your kids will be transformed by it."*
-Shmuley Boteach



How can you get your kids to open up and talk with you? Most kids talk nonstop when they’re in preschool. In elementary school, many of them begin to clam up with their parents. But there are strategies to get your kids to talk with you, and the more they get used to it, the more natural it will become.

**1. Notice the little conversation openers**

Notice the little conversation openers your kids offer, and drop everything to respond, at least once they’re past eight or so. It can be excruciating to tear yourself away from what you’re doing to focus on a child's question, but how you respond to his overture is crucial in building closeness. To him, it’s an indication of whether he can count on you to talk when he needs you. And much more important than any conversation you try to initiate, like when you try to get him to tell you what happened at school today.

Parents who have close relationships with their teens often attribute their closeness to their willingness to be available if their teen signals a desire to talk -- even if it's 1am and her boyfriend just broke up with her. This can be difficult if you're also handling a demanding job and other responsibilities, of course. But teens who feel that other things are more important to their parents often look elsewhere when they're emotionally needy. And that's our loss, as much as theirs.

**2. Ask nonjudgmental questions that require real answers.**

*“What was the best thing about school today?,” “Do the kids at school ever talk about boyfriends and girlfriends?,” “Who did you sit with at lunch today?” or “How did the soccer game go at recess?” will get you a lot further than “How was school today?”*

Questions that begin with “Why” often make kids defensive; “Why did you wear that?” won’t work nearly as well as “What do you think most of the kids will be wearing on the field trip?”

**3. Don't jump in with solutions and advice.**

Your child needs a chance to vent, and he can't hear advice until he does. Then he needs a chance to figure out his own solutions, which is how he develops confidence and competence. If you jump in with solutions, you make him feel incompetent. I find this so hard -- I always want to tell my kids what to do. I'm a professional advice-giver, after all! But when we can reflect feelings and then help them brainstorm solutions, kids find us more useful to talk to -- and they're more likely to seek us out when they have problems.

**4. Make sure you connect with each of your children every single day**

Make sure you connect with each of your children every single day, alone, even if just for a short time. Being on hand when they come home is a sure-fire way to hear the highlights of the day, but anytime you get in their space and in sync with their energy level works.

When they're toddlers we call it floor-time; with nine year olds you might snuggle on the couch while you chat about anything from their day at school to the coming weekend to a TV show you just watched together. With teens you might develop a little ritual, like sharing a cup of tea every night before bed while the two of you catch up.

Don't expect your son or daughter to invite closeness or volunteer vulnerable emotions at each interaction, or when you expect it. But if you set up enough regular opportunities to be together, it will happen.

**5. Build “special time” with each child into your routine.**

Maybe Dad and daughter go to brunch once a month, or play basketball together once a week. Maybe Mom and son get to catch up on his life during the drives to swim team. Kids often wait for these routine times with their parents to bring up something that’s bothering them.

**6. If you don't get the response you want to your overtures towards your kids, step back and watch how you initiate.**

Are you inviting a positive response? Kids have a lot on their minds, from the history test to the soccer tryouts to the newest computer game. Not to mention that by the time they’re tweens they’re swamped with hormones, and checking themselves out in every mirror they pass. Parents can be dismally low on their list, but that's actually a good sign. They can take us for granted because they know we're there for them!

So find ways to get in their face in a friendly, inoffensive way. It’s fine to demand and expect connection – you have a right to a relationship with your child. But you’re more likely to find the response you want if you can help your child remember why she likes you! *“I was hoping we could go out for brunch one day this weekend for some special Mom and Alice time”* will work a lot better than *“You never tell me anything these days!”*

**7. If you make an overture and are greeted with something hurtful -- disdain, sarcasm, or blankness -- try not to respond with anger.**

Instead, show your vulnerability and hurt. Say "Ouch!" and turn away (before you give in to the temptation to lash out.) Your son or daughter will almost certainly feel badly about having hurt you, especially since you haven't aroused their ire by attacking back. Remind yourself that the slight was probably unintentional and that being close to your child is your priority.

Later, when you aren't upset, use a light touch to tell your child how much you wanted to connect and how hurt you were. Your child will probably apologize, and learn something about relating civilly. If not, it’s an indication that your relationship needs some repair work, and a heart to heart is in order. Reaffirm how much you love your child and want to be close, as well as your commitment to a home where everyone treats each other with respect. Then ask what he or she thinks is getting in the way of a loving relationship between you.

**8. Stay available.**

Most kids don’t keep an agenda and bring things up at a scheduled meeting. And nothing makes them clam up faster than pressing them to talk. Kids talk when something is up for them, particularly if you've proven yourself to be a good listener, but not overly attached to their opening up to you. If you act like the information they have is a gem you need, they often won’t be able to resist that power and will become even more tight-fisted about sharing!

Young kids usually talk with no hesitancy. Some time-honored strategies include asking questions while in the car, or while they do art or build things. Picking up a crayon or a block yourself creates more connection and more likelihood that they’ll share their thoughts.

With older kids, whether they will talk to you depends on your overall relationship. If it's close, then they won't need to worry about whether to trust you with delicate information, and they won't need to seize a rare chance for power in the relationship by withholding info. So if your child isn't opening up, you might spend some time on the rest of this website getting ideas to strengthen that relationship. But do remember that teens cherish their right to privacy and resist being intrusive.

Never waste a car ride or a simple task like folding laundry together. Simply being in the same room can create the opportunity for interaction. If you’re cooking dinner and she’s doing her nails or her homework, for instance, there's often an opening. Of course, if one of you is hunched over the computer, the interaction is likely to be more limited. Find ways to be in proximity where you’re both potentially available, without it seeming like a demand.

Stating your availability is helpful, even with teens.

*"I'll be in the kitchen making dinner if you want me"* or *"I have to run to the grocery store, but don't hesitate to call my cell phone if you need me."*

But the most important part of staying available is a state of mind. Your child will sense your emotional availability.

**9. Use indirect communication.**

Kids often open more in the car, on a walk, or in the dark -- all times when eye contact is limited. Remember that these are great times to get kids talking. Another opportunity for indirect communication is when their friends are over, or in your car. Just keep your mouth shut and listen. Your kid knows you're there, of course, but often is more willing to talk than if you were speaking directly.

**10. LISTEN.**

This is, of course, the single the most important part of helping kids open up. Don't talk, listen. Reflect back what they’re saying so they know you understand, and then be quiet so they can talk more. If they don't keep talking, you can ask another question, but keep your tone companionable, not interrogatory.