

# DEALING WITH SMALL CHILDREN.

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## COMMUNICATING WITH CHILDREN ABOUT SCHOOL.

Why is it so hard to talk about school? Parents often get annoyed with kids' monosyllabic answers to their simple questions. That one well-intentioned line, "How was school today?" has probably provoked more bad feelings between parents and kids than either party ever intended.

"How was school today?' is a frustrating question for both parents and kids," notes Michael Thompson, Ph.D., author of "The Pressured Child." "Parents never get the answer they want and often don't understand how difficult this question really is. Without meaning to, parents are asking for a summary but kids don't summarize the way adults do. So most kids just say 'fine' or try to avoid the question entirely." And then the problem escalates. "Many parents will repeat this question if they don't get a good enough response because they don't know how else to ask it," adds Lawrence Cohen, Ph.D., author of "Playful Parenting."

Fortunately, some simple strategies can get kids and parents talking and listening.

"What was fun?

What was the worst part of the day?

Did your teacher explain that math homework?

How did soccer go?"

However, communicating effectively about school goes deeper than just asking the right questions. "What are the goals of talking with kids about school and what is the role of the adult in these conversations?" asks Diane Levin, Ph.D., professor of education at Wheelock College. "More than just finding out how their day was, we want to help kids become problems solvers and independent learners. Good conversations help kids see

we care about their lives that we are there to support them, and to help them develop strategies for solving problems themselves.”

Try these strategies to get kids and parents talking about school and listening to each other in meaningful ways.

## UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER.

So why don't our kids want to tell us about their day at school? And why do we think we need to know every detail? And how can we become more effective listeners? To find out, take a look at the situation from your child's perspective and compare it to your own.

**“How was school?” and “how are you?” are not really questions — they're greetings.** A problem arises because we expect an answer. But the question is so general that it's difficult for kids to answer, particularly when they are on overload from a challenging day at school. “What parents are trying to do when they ask ‘How was school?’ is to make contact with their child,” explains Michael Thompson, Ph.D. But we don't realize that the question “How was school?” may not be the most effective way to connect.

**Kids often think adults ask too many questions.** “And they are right,” “we do. Adults are often just trying to start a conversation and don't understand that their questions make a child feel put on the spot. Be aware that a question from a big person like you can place demands on a small child, even though you don't mean it that way. ”It's important to also be clear why you are asking children about school. Is it merely chit chat, are you looking for something more meaningful, and are you communicating in ways that relate to your child's experience?”

**School can be hard for kids and that's why it's hard for them to talk about it.** Every day at school, kids get things wrong and make mistakes. That's how they learn. But generally, kids don't want to come home and say, "I was frustrated by my mistakes but I learned from them." They would rather come home and say, "I got everything right." Their feelings about meeting the expectations of their teachers, their parents, and themselves can make school a challenging topic to discuss.

**So — should we stop asking questions?** No. But you might ask fewer ones and try not to get crazy when your kids don't respond the way you want them to. Remember that if your kids don't want to talk, it's not a rejection of you. When you do speak, try to find ways to discuss what's meaningful to both your child and you, because this shows that you care.

## TALKING STRATEGIES.

There isn't one right way, one perfect question, or one right time to have these conversations. Here are some suggestions to try:

**Greet your child with an enthusiastic hello.** Try saying "great to see you!" or "I missed you!" or simply, "I hope you had a good day," instead of "How was school?" These statements communicate what you really feel without instantly putting your child on the spot with a question. As a result, your child is more likely to speak about her day.

**Allow your child not to talk right after school.** Many kids don't want to talk the minute they walk in the door. They want to have a snack, or just chill out. (Think about how you feel when you walk in after a long day at work. Wouldn't you rather put your feet up and talk later?)

**Learn about your child's life at school.** The more details you know about your child's school experience, the more valuable your questions will be. If you know the teacher reads a story every day, ask "What story did Mrs. Younger read today?"

If you know the teacher's newsletter comes home on Wednesday, set up a ritual to read it together at dinner. If you visit your child's classroom, make note of new things you might want to discuss with your child later.

**Say what's on your mind.** If what you really need to know is "How did you do on the math test?" just ask. If you fish around, your child will resent it more. "But keep in mind that if you frequently ask questions about tests, that's all kids will think you care about,"

**Avoid face-to-face interrogations.** You might do better in situations where you're not face-to-face like the car, when your child takes a bath, or when you are cooking. In this way, your child won't feel put on the spot.

**Let the talk emerge naturally.** Discuss the day while you cook dinner, read together, or check homework. But try not to use dinner as a time to talk about problems like homework or tests. Everybody needs a break!

**Listen before you talk.** Let your child lead you into conversations on her own. Sometimes your child will drop hints without your asking, like "We planted seeds today!" or "Where's the atlas? I need to find Antarctica." These are perfect openings to talk together about school.

**Try communicating without words.** The best way to make contact with your child isn't necessarily through talking. "We want our children to talk with us — because talking is our way of communicating. But talk is not how all kids express themselves: play is," "If we insist they talk our way, we may not get much information, but if we play on their terms, we might. Many children would prefer to reconnect with a hug or by playing a

game. Some are more physical than verbal, so you might ask them to give you thumbs up or thumbs down about school, instead of describing it.”

**Talk about funny things that happened to you.** One of the best ways to stimulate conversation is to talk about funny stuff kids can relate to. “A great way to start conversation is to describe an interesting and funny event from your day. Kids will then respond and talk about interesting things that happened to them, “Talk about the skunk you passed on the way to work. Talk about the toilet paper that got stuck to your shoe. Talk about the piece of sukuma you saw hanging from your boss’ nose. Your kids will laugh and probably start talking to you — even the older ones.

**Don’t jump in to fix your child’s problem immediately.** If your child brings up a problem like “I hate my teacher!” take it in stride. First, find out what else your child has to say and what he wants to do about it. You might encourage your child to figure out solutions by asking, “What do you think you want to do about this?” and “Is there something you’d like me to do?” Follow up later with “How did your new strategies work?” or “You haven’t mentioned math class lately, does that mean it’s going better?” If the problem is serious, discuss it with the school.

**Help children develop their own solutions.** Don’t feel you need to supply the right answer yourself. Instead, share ideas about possible solutions that will help your child feel better. This is a way to help your child see you as an ally who will support him when problems come up. By helping your child figure it out for himself, you are also giving him a whole set of tools for solving the problems independently as he gets older.

## QUESTIONS THAT WORK.

Whatever your child's age, a specific question, or even a specific statement, may prompt more of a response than the more general "How was school today?" If you listen to your child's answer, and (if the opening is there) ask another question, you'll be on your way to a meaningful conversation.

### **Ask kids about what interests them:**

- "What did you do that was fun today?"
- "Did anything funny happen?"
- "What did you like best today?"
- "Did you read any new books in library?"
- "How did the science experiment turn out?"

### **Ask about specific people and events in your child's life:**

- "Did Mrs. Njoroge go over that math test?"
- "What did Mr. Maina talk about in social studies?"
- "Who did you sit next to on the bus?"
- "Did Mrs. Kamau call on you today?"
- "Are you and Helen still having a hard time?"
- "How are you and Charlie doing?"
- "What do your friends think about the new teacher?"

**Ask kids about what annoys them.** Everybody likes to complain, so if your child is in a bad mood, ask what's wrong. You might find that within a few minutes, your child is telling you what she likes. You might ask:

- "Anybody got on your nerves today?"
- "Was your teacher annoying again?"
- "Was there anything really hard for you?"

**Make comments about schoolwork.** You can look over your child's work or the teacher's weekly class note, and ask:

- “Wow, what a cool picture of a squirrel. I like the bushy tail. What does he use it for?”
- “Can you explain photosynthesis to me?”
- “What is a whole number, anyway?”

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD IS A BULLY.

No parent wants to get a call from the school principal about bullying, but what if the call isn't about your child as the victim, but instead as the perpetrator of harassment? Your gut reaction might be to deny it—how could your sweet angel be involved in something so nasty?—but bullying isn't a problem that anyone should ignore. So take a deep breath and commit yourself to finding out what's going on and making whatever changes are necessary to be sure you aren't harboring a bully at home. Here are six steps to follow.

KNOWLEDGE TO EARN  
*Learn, Share, Earn*

1. **Find out what happened.** Your initial instinct might be to get angry, but bullying expert Joel Haber, Ph.D., says parents need to keep their cool. Instead, Haber recommends asking your child to tell you, in his own words, what happened and what his role in the incident was. “Kids have to take accountability for their behavior,” says Haber. If your child tries to push the blame onto another participant, be firm and reiterate that you aren't interested in hearing about other kids—just your child's role in the bullying.
2. **Encourage empathy with the victim.** After you get your child's side of the story, ask him to imagine himself in his victim's shoes. How would he feel if someone did the same thing to him? “The earlier we can help kids develop empathy, the better chance we have of them not becoming a bully,” says Haber.

3. **Have your child make restitution.** Once your child owns what she did and acknowledges the hurt she's caused, it's time for her to try to make amends for the situation. This may mean apologizing to the other child in the presence of a school guidance counselor, or, in the case of cyber bullying, contacting all the recipients of a hurtful e-mail to issue a correction.
4. **Try to get to the root cause of the bullying.** Just because your child did something hurtful doesn't mean that he's a bad kid or that you're a failure as a parent. Most likely it means that he's struggling to get something he wants—acknowledgment or attention or control, for instance—and falling back on bad patterns of behavior. So try to get to the root cause of the behavior, and then brainstorm different, more positive ways to act. "One way to do that is to acknowledge, 'Okay, those desires are normal. I want to teach you better ways of getting what you want or being popular.'"
5. **Involve the school.** You can't monitor your child 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so if you believe that your child is a bully, you need to enlist the school to help keep tabs on her behavior and report back to you. "Tell the guidance and counselors and the teachers that you don't support bullying and you want to know if it occurs,"
6. **Be a role model.** There is an antidrug television commercial from the 1980s in which the parent asks his son where he learned to do drugs, and the son replies, "I learned it from watching you!"? The same commercial could probably be made about bullying. "If your kid is truly the bully, you have to examine what's going on in your own home," So be honest with yourself: What behaviors do you model that send your child the message that it's okay to make another person feel small? Are you curt with salespeople? Do you gossip and spread rumors? Roll your eyes when you hear something you disagree with? If so, it's time to change—for your kid's sake, as well as your own. "Kids observe what we do and follow what we do more than they listen to us," If we as parents want to stop the bullying, we all have to get on board.