

# Have a Conversation About School



## Get beyond one-word answers and find out what your child really thinks and feels about school.

by Emily Graham

Maybe your daughter says she hates social studies but won't tell you why. Or your son, when asked what he learned at school, just says "Nothing." Talking about school with your children shows them that you value education and keeps you aware of what's going on in their lives, but what should you do when they don't want to talk?

### Getting the Conversation Started

First, think about the time of day and the kind of questions you ask. Whether your child is a chatty 1st grader or a tightlipped teenager, he may not want to talk about a tough math test as soon as he gets home from school. And questions like "How was school?" are bound to elicit uninformative answers like "Fine."

Experts recommend taking a few minutes to reconnect as a family after the busy day before addressing school and household issues. Let your kids know you're glad to see them and wait a while to ask about grades. Keep in mind that kids may be tired or preoccupied when they first come home, or they may want some quiet time before launching into the evening's activities.

When you start a conversation about school, ask specific questions about parts of your child's day or the school environment, advises Laurence Steinberg, author of *The 10 Basic Principles of Good Parenting* and a psychology professor at Temple University.

"I think the biggest mistake parents make is to ask broad questions like 'How was your day today?' and their kids give a one- or two-word answer," Steinberg says. "The more specific you are in your questions, the more of an answer you're likely to get."

At the beginning of the school year, Steinberg suggests asking general questions to learn about a child's classroom, teacher, and classmates, such as:

- What does your classroom look like? Where is your desk?
- Which of your friends are in your class? Who else is in your class?
- What did you like best at school today?
- What did you have for lunch?

If your child is not talkative, you can still learn a lot about her school experience through other means. Read the school newsletter, email the teacher, and talk to other parents on the phone. As you become more familiar with your child's daily routine, you can ask more specific questions to get her talking about a project or a class pet.

## **Talking About Problems**

What should you do when your daughter announces that she hates school or when your son says he can't stand the kids in his class? Even for children prone to melodrama, these kinds of statements may signal that a child is having academic or social problems at school. It's important to get to the root of the problem, Steinberg says, and that will take patience and understanding.

When your daughter says "I hate school," it could mean she is bored in class, doesn't understand new material, is being pushed too hard, or doesn't get along with a teacher. Your son's declaration that he doesn't like the other kids may mean that he feels ignored or friendless or that he's being bullied or victimized.

Parents can help by talking with their kids about steps they can take to make the situation better. Younger children may need their parents' help to think about how to solve a problem, while older children need a chance to solve problems on their own, Steinberg says.

While most kids will be nervous about new experiences, that nervousness should fade over time, Steinberg says. Parents should be cheerful, yet firm, in dealing with their kids. "The most important thing for the child to have is support from you."

## **Communicating With Kids: Tips by Age Group**

Playground disputes and disappointing grades—and learning to deal with them—are important parts of growing up. Before you intervene on your child's behalf, think about what response is appropriate for his maturity level and developmental stage.

### **Talking With Young Children**

Younger children, especially those in kindergarten through 3rd grade, will need help thinking about how to respond to problems at school. You can help your child learn problem-solving skills by talking about potential responses and what results they may bring. Help your child decide the best steps to take and encourage her to do what she can on her own.

Older children may be aware of potential solutions but still need encouragement to act. Children sometimes need coaching from their parents to take the first step, says Temple University psychology professor Laurence Steinberg.

If the problem persists, Steinberg recommends calling your child's teacher to see what insights she can bring.

### **Talking with Adolescents**

By 4th or 5th grade, children may become more resistant to parental involvement. Although it's a difficult balance, it's important to respect your adolescent's growing desire for autonomy while being available to help when needed. For example, if a 7th grader is struggling in math class, talking with the child about the best way to ask the teacher for extra help is likely to be more effective than calling the teacher directly, Steinberg says.

As adolescents feel the need for more privacy, there will be times they simply don't want to talk. When that happens, Steinberg recommends the following approach: "If a 12- or 13-year-old looks upset, say 'You look upset. Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?' If the child says no, say 'That's OK, but if you do feel like talking, I'm here.' "