



November 19, 2007

*Parental Wisdom – Emails
Talking to toddlers teaches us
how to talk to teens*

Q. What's the secret to talking with teenagers?

A. Start talking to them when they're toddlers.

A television commercial opens with a little girl watching a Sponge Bob cartoon. Her mom motions to her that it's time to go, and the little girl gets up and runs into their Dodge mini-van. As the mom starts the car the same cartoon appears on the screen headrest, as Dodge's caption paints in on the screen, 'Don't miss the moment.'

Dodge is promoting a feature that is doing exactly the opposite of its promise. The intrusion of the media causes you to miss the moment.

As the busy holiday season begins, be sure not to miss opportunities to talk with your children, building traditions and memories. Involve them in the activities on your to-do list, resisting the temptation to plop them in front of the TV so you can get that list done.

Talking to our children when they're little is practice for talking to them as they get older. Asking good questions leaves both you and your child interested in talking more.

Here are five good ways to talk with your children:

1. Ask specific, not general questions: Rather than asking a child, "How was school today?" (general question) which gives kids little choice try asking specific questions such as, "Did you go outside and play today?" or "What was the discussion in social studies?" or "How was the volleyball tournament in gym class?" Specific questions indicate real interest and are real questions.
2. Ask for a solution: If a child tells you to stop nagging about putting their stuff away, ask them for their solution- e.g. "Okay, so if you were me how would you go about getting kids to put things where they belong?" This opens the door for negotiation and places responsibility on children to be involved in the solution.
3. Ask specific questions to get information: If a child is upset by something that happened at pre-school, school or even the next room there are times when you just have to get more information. "Can you tell me what happened?" "What was it that upset you?" Sometimes being listened to is all kids need.
4. Consult with your child: Ask questions that tap into and broaden your child's self-knowledge. "When do you feel you can do your best homework?" Kids know from the cradle what they need so let's tap into that knowledge.
5. Ask what they would like to change: If a child complains about something specific, such as their sibling's behavior, ask them what they would like to change. "If you could name one thing that would help you and your brother get along better, what would it be?" This can often open up a range of conversational options.

During the holiday season, we visit with extended family as well, and should capitalize on those moments.

As the 'elders' we have a responsibility to get to know the children in our family and notice the growth and changes in children from year to year. Following the same communication guidelines, resist the urge to ask general questions, such as "So, how's school?"

Parents should be mindful that children busy with text messaging their friends or playing with hand-held games are shutting down the opportunity to meet with family. Take away the electronic toys and pay attention to the people in your life - they matter.

After all, the real gifts of the holiday season are the times we have together.

The lack of emotional security of our American young people is due, I believe, to their isolation from the larger family unit. No two people - no mere father and mother - as I have often said, are enough to provide emotional security for a child. He needs to feel himself one in a world of kinfolk, persons of variety in age and temperament, and yet allied to himself by an indissoluble bond which he cannot break if he could, for nature has welded him into it before he was born.

-Pearl Buck