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insights



Moving beyond asking, "What did you do at school?"

By Michael Grose

Ever found yourself asking your child the same bland question about school?

"So, how was your day? What did you do at school today? What did you learn?"

If these are your default questions the chances are that you'll get a one or two word reply along the lines, "Fine!" "Good!" "Okay" "Nothing much."

These answers don't really tell you a lot. On the other hand, these types of questions don't ask a great deal.

So how can you move beyond the mundane when you talk with kids about their school days?

Set the atmosphere

It helps to create the right atmosphere for conversations. A quick "How was your day?" as you pick a child up from after-school is a rapport-builder or mood checker, but little more.

If you drive you may learn a bit on the trip home, particularly if you keep the radio off and are able to keep some distance between kids and mobile devices. Alternatively, walking home together may loosen up your child's tongue and put them in the mood for talking.

Give kids a chance

Most kids need some time and space to unwind before expecting them

to talk about their day, particularly if you are going to launch and ask them questions. This makes sense as most adults would feel annoyed if they were assaulted as soon as they walked in the door about their day, "How was your day? What did you do? Who did you see?" Ahh! Stop!

Create conversations rather than ask questions

The dinner table makes a great place to talk, if all televisions are off, mobile devices are left behind and you take the time to make it more than a pit stop. One way to kick off a conversation is to ask kids if they'd like to hear about your day. From my experience kids are often interested in the most mundane things that go on in an adult's day so don't think you have to make it sound grander than what it is. This gives kids permission to talk about their own days; your story can stimulate conversations which provides openings for kids to ask questions and share a little or in some cases a lot about their own day at school.

Interesting questions lead to interesting conversations

The questions you ask to prompt a conversation will often say a great deal about you and what you value. If you focus only on academic or learning questions then it indicates that's what you value.



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It helps to take conversations and your questions in different directions to get a multi-faceted window into your child's school life but also an indication of your child's interests, social skills and welfare. Here are some examples of question starters that may prompt different responses from kids about their time at school:

- 1 Tell me what made you laugh today?
- 2 Who did you play with at recess today?
- 3 Did you do anything that was brave?
- 4 If I spoke to your teacher, what would she tell me about you?
- 5 What did your teacher talk about today?
- 6 Is there anyone in your class who needs to be in time out?
- 7 Where's the best place to hang out/play at school?
- 8 Tell me one good thing that happened to you today?
- 9 Who were you nice/kind/friendly to today?
- 10 Did anyone push your buttons today?
- 11 What did you do that you were proud of/happy with today?
- 12 What's something you learned with a friend today?
- 13 What's your teacher's most important rule?
- 14 If today was a musical instrument what would it be? Why?
- 15 If you were a teacher tomorrow, what would you teach the class?

Next time you ask a clichéd and dull question about your child's day stop yourself before you utter the words. Instead think outside the square and ask questions that may stimulate a response beyond "Fine" or "Nothing." And remember they may not feel like talking, which is fine too. Like adults, kids need to be in the right mood and the right environment if they are going to share a meaningful conversation about their day.



Special note: I'm thrilled to announce that my latest book *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children* is out. It's available at parentingideas.com.au

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