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APRIL 2008

Parents



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Small Talk

Want to find out how your child's day was? These questions will get you the answers you want.

BY KAREN M. LYNCH

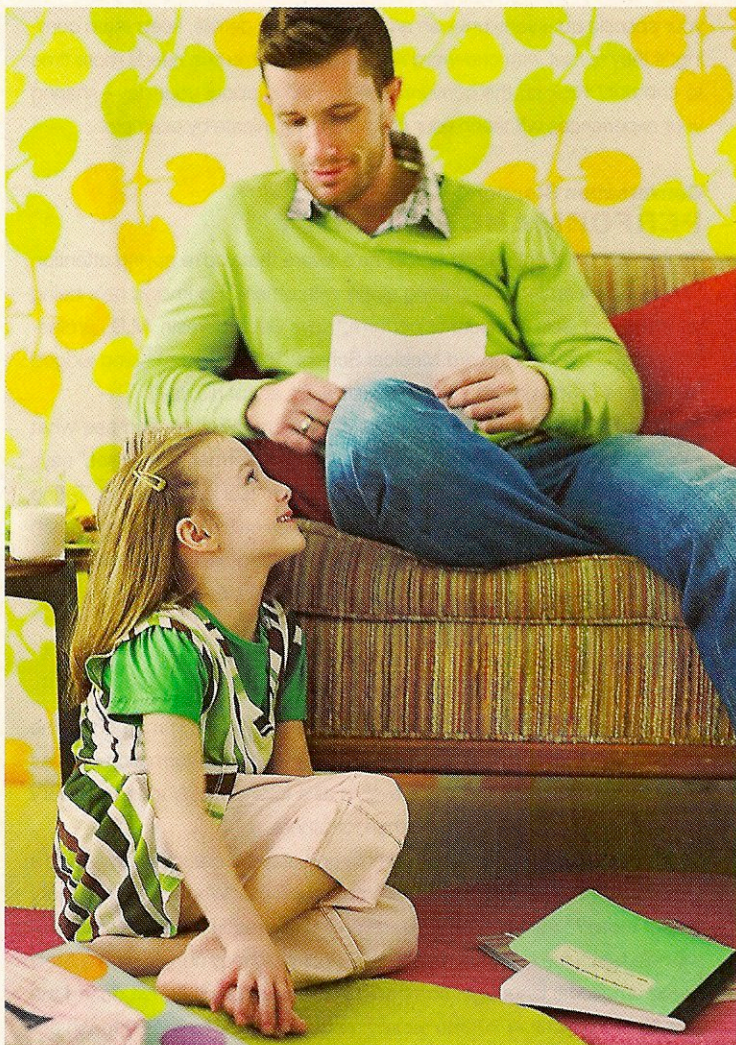
Sometimes it's hard to believe that a child who can recount the plot of a movie she saw six months ago or who has an almost scholarly knowledge of Yu-Gi-Oh! cards can't seem to answer a simple question about her day. Maybe you get "good," or "fine," or the conversation killer: "I don't remember." Take comfort in the fact that she's not giving you the cold shoulder on purpose. "Kids this age want to connect; the problem is, unlike adults, they don't usually do it by recounting the details of their day," says Dawn Huebner, Ph.D., psychologist and author of the *What-to-Do Guides for Kids* series. But that doesn't mean she can't learn to communicate. If you know why your child clams up and if you have some tactics to help her organize her thoughts, you'll be well on your way to getting the need-to-know scoop.

Conversation Stopper:

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

A million things, great and small, have happened since your son got on the school bus, so when you ask "What happened today?" he may be overwhelmed. Should he tell you about the fire drill? The weird smell in the lunchroom? How he scored 100 on the spelling test? "He doesn't know what kind of information you want, so he truly draws a blank," says Adam Cox, Ph.D., author of *Boys of Few Words: Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect*.

Talking Points: By asking specific questions like, "Who did you play with at recess?" or "Who did you sit next to at lunch?" you'll begin teaching your child how to scroll back in time and make stories out of his experiences, explains Dr. Huebner. You'll also be giving him a better idea of the kind of things you're interested



in knowing. If you want lively answers, ask fun questions: Best/Worst or Coolest/Most Uncool thing that happened is engaging, and it provides another way to help kids share the day's events.

Conversation Stopper:

TOUGH TRANSITIONS

Your child is straddling two worlds. "For a good part of the day she's responsible for herself and navigates complex situations without your help," says Gretchen Barber-Lindstrom, a Phoenix-based social worker. Then, suddenly, she's back home where she can let her guard down and be a little kid again. "It can be hard to switch gears," says Barber-Lindstrom. She might find it overwhelming to sort out the emotions of the day.

Talking Points: Let her have some time to decompress after school. Give her a snack and some downtime before you ask about her day. "Take cues from your child," says Dr. Huebner. "If

★ *One trick to get the ball rolling: Ask your kid questions about what his friends did at school instead of what he did.*

your specific questions unleash an eager flood of details, keep them coming. If they're met with one-word responses, assume she needs more time to chill out." Kick off the conversation by talking about your day—sharing your experiences will teach your child to communicate by example.

Conversation Stopper:

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

"Once your child enters first grade, he's aware that you're paying attention to how he's learning and getting along with others. He knows he's being watched and feels pressure to perform," says Gene Beresin, M.D., professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. This feeling of being judged can keep a child from wanting to share details about his day.

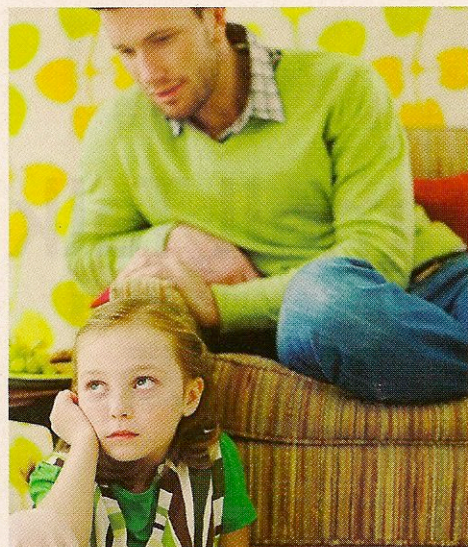
Talking Points: Try playing a game or reading together, and see what topics naturally arise. "Sometimes we try to get information too fast," says Dr. Cox. Doing an activity together can help him feel less guarded. Telling you that he didn't know an answer when he was called on in class is much easier when he's feeling close to you. Withhold judgment. If your child feels it isn't safe for him to share the low points in his day, he'll shut down.

Conversation Stopper:

SHORT MEMORY

At this age, your child is actively increasing his "working memory"—the process used for temporarily storing and manipulating information. He has limited ability to recall the day's events at a later time. Working memory grows over time, faster for some than for others.

Talking Points: Chat up other parents and stay in contact with your kid's teacher so you'll be able to offer prompts such as: "Who was the mystery reader today?" Asking questions—even if you already know the answer—will help teach the art of the recap. Also, your child may not yet have a finely tuned emotional language, so opening up about things he felt during the day can be difficult. "Children usually respond to their feelings through action, because they can't always identify the feeling," says Michelle Maidenberg, Ph.D., the clinical director of Westchester Group Works, a center for group therapy. You can help build his emotional vocabulary by using words like excitement, anger, fatigue, worry, or frustration when you're talking about his behavior so he begins to see that there's a connection.



Stop Problem-Solving!

When your child is facing a challenge, of course you want to swoop in and save the day. But keep in mind that at school your kid is figuring things out for herself all day long. If you give your child solutions, you'll make her less resourceful. She'll think, "If they aren't like Mom's and Dad's, my ideas must be wrong."

Helping kids solve problems for themselves, on the other hand, is empowering. "When you facilitate instead of taking over, you're subliminally increasing your child's confidence," says Dr. Michelle Maidenberg. Ask questions like, "What do you think your options are?" or "What are you most comfortable doing?" If your kid believes she figured things out herself, it will be a self-confidence booster. When your child walks away from a conversation with positive feelings she will come back to talk to you again and again.

Privacy Matters

Even a 6-year-old needs some space. Follow these tips to walk the fine line between involved and intrusive.

● **DO** allow your child to say he just doesn't feel like talking, but don't let him get away with ignoring you. Try to discuss why he's uncomfortable about a particular subject.

● **DON'T** barrage your child with questions if you notice she's getting anxious or seems distressed. "Kids shouldn't be put on the spot. If they sense you're prying, you need to back off," says Dr. Gene Beresin.

● **DO** ask your child if he'd like to talk about something later in the day, but don't argue with him if he says no. Respect his decision to keep some things to himself.

● **DON'T** bring up information you hear from secondhand sources unless it concerns your child's well-being. "When it involves health, safety, or respect for others, there's just no compromise. You have to talk about it even if your kid doesn't want to," says Dr. Michelle Maidenberg.