

Today's Kids

Is it really communication?

Talk is cheap. But, it's probably one of the most important investments you can make in your children. Of course, these days we all have very busy schedules and sometimes simple, leisurely conversation becomes a luxury. Make the most of every opportunity. The way you talk to your children and the frequency you engage children in conversation will have a profound effect on how you relate to them.

Think about your week and when you talk with your children. Where do these conversations go? Are you discussing how they are doing, what they're feeling or what they like and dislike? Or are you simply issuing commands? True, children need direction about completing daily tasks, but they also need the chance to express their feelings, ideas and opinions.

If you consciously build some "talk time" into each day it will become routine, a wonderful habit you won't ever want to break. It can be any time – when you're riding in the car, preparing dinner, folding laundry, or at bedtime. Loosely structure this time with your kids with no distractions – no books, magazines or newspapers and no radio, televisions, or video games. Kids hate trying to play a video game with someone yakking at them. And there's nothing more frustrating to a parent than when their child, engrossed in a video game, grunts "uh huh" to every comment.

If you start talking with your children when they are young, they will be more likely to talk to you when they become teenagers. Young children love to express their opinions on any topic. They also love to explain their world to anyone who will listen. Please listen to your little ones patiently and build a pattern of daily dialog.

It's up to you to be a good conversation role model for your children. If your children see you conversing with your spouse and your friends about a variety of topics, they will understand how adult conversation is supposed to work. Children can't model what they haven't seen.

Even though it's hard sometimes, try to never lose your cool when talking with your kids. The goal is to get a conversation going – both parent and child talking and listening. If you confuse a lecture with conversation, I guarantee your child will clam up. Children don't want to hear a monologue on how to improve their appearance, grades or friends. Think about it, is that something *you* would want to hear? They want someone who will listen to them, someone they can talk to without fear of rejection, lectures or ridicule.

Don't mistake technology for communication. True, a quick call to your kids after school reminding them of homework and chores is a great way to touch base. Call waiting and cellular phones mean that our children can always reach us for emergencies. But, these brief encounters are no substitute for an in-person chat when you get home, catching up with the events of each other's day. That's priceless, and something no electronic gizmo can ever replace.

In fact, all this technology can even get in the way of communication. By that I mean true communication. With teenagers plugged into computers, video games and the telephone, dad and/or mom bringing work home on the laptop and younger children tuned into television or their own video games, there's often no time left to actually talk with each other. Can we really know what our children are thinking or feeling when they

are on the other end of the telephone or computer? We only have their words – we cannot see their facial expressions or body language that can hold many clues to the message they are trying to convey. There's a reason that old phone company slogan was, it's the *next best thing* to being there! Why settle for second best?

Furthermore, beware that children will see many poor communication role models on television, and this may undermine your attempts to get a dialog going at your house. Often the noise of the radio is enough to stifle any meaningful talk. Even books and magazines, when present at the dining table or other times when you and your child are trying to talk, can be conversation killers.

Conversation will start flowing if you head for new or neutral ground. Perhaps a change of scenery, a short drive, or an invitation to share a cup of hot chocolate at a local restaurant will do the trick. What a child may be uncomfortable telling you at the dinner table might come spilling out during a nighttime drive for ice cream.

So keep in mind these four easy rules for talking to your kids: 1. Start early. 2. Keep talking. 3. Keep your cool. 4. And, don't let electronic gadgets (or anything else, for that matter) get in the way.

When you do all of the above, one thing is for sure: talk will never again seem so cheap.