



September 14, 2010
 Circulation: 6,138
 Impressions: 6,138

Some Great Back to School Tips for Getting Dinner Table Conversation Started

September 13, 2010 by [Theresa Gould](#)

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Dinner Table Tips

With school starting and parents and children going in different directions with various extracurricular activities, work and school, we understand how important it is to reconnect after being apart all day. For some of us though, conversation is often the last thing on our minds after a busy day. What are some ways you'd suggest to get the conversation started at the dinner table?

"Tell me about your day" is usually a non-starter for people of all ages! It's too open-ended.

Children respond best to specific questions. If you know there was something special planned for that day, then you can ask your child, "Please tell us about____." If you're not aware of anything special, then you'll need to do some sleuthing. Note the type of homework or art project that comes out of the backpack, or you can even just ask, "What was your favorite part of today?" That will get your child started. Other siblings should be expected to let each child have his or her say, eventually learning that he or she will also have a turn.

In addition to letting the children report on things, it's important for parents to get in the habit of commenting on one or two things that happened to you...it can be something funny, or it can be a difficult challenge you were working on for the day. It's important for children to have a vision of where you were and what you do during the day. That will lay important groundwork for conversation sharing as they get older.

What topics can we talk about and how do we avoid the one word responses and get our children to really engage with us?

If you have asked about something specific about their day, children will usually keep talking. However, if you hit one-word responses, try, “Oh how interesting. Tell us more...” or “How did you feel when Janie said she was moving?” or “What happened when you went to the library today? Should we visit on Saturday so you can show me what you saw?” You can break through the one-word responses by asking follow-up questions. Most kids will respond if they know you are interested.

How can we naturally discuss important events of the day with our children in ways that are engaging, fun and easy to understand?

While there are many topics that are too upsetting to discuss with children, there are some important ways to help make them aware of the world beyond your home.

Just as there are “gateway drugs,” there are also “gateway avenues” into the wider world. For boys, the sports news has long been the subject that has brought them into the newspaper—or today the websites—that introduce them to bigger topics. As more girls become athletes, they too may enter the bigger world in that way.

For non-athletes, there is nothing wrong with entertainment news. The musically-oriented child may be interested in a favorite singer or band; for some, they won't be able to get enough of Lindsay or Paris or Britney...and that's okay. News of these celebrities offers an opportunity to talk about family moral values. Magazines like People also cover important news stories. Are celebrities raising money for the Pakistan floods? They also have features like “heroes among us” that talk about regular people doing good works. These topics all provide insight into the larger world.

If you look at sports and entertainment news as “gateways,” you may soon find that you can talk about why Roger Clemens is appearing before Congress, and, next thing you know, your son or daughter is reading a story is on a news site, not a sports site.

So let your child follow his or her interests, and encourage learning all they can about Mark Sanchez of the Jets or Justin Bieber. Then, use your adult sensibility to lift the conversation to a higher level of awareness about the world.

Major news stories—flooding or terrorism or earthquakes—can be discussed simply. You can provide a little information and then say, “It makes me feel sad for those people.” Children also need to be reassured that something like that can’t happen to them. While we can offer no guarantees in life, you can offer general feelings of safety, noting that flooding in Kansas or a big fire near your home is very unlikely. You can also introduce the idea that the United States spends a lot of money on workers to protect us against natural disasters.

If you are very concerned about something in your area, nothing speaks more loudly to your children than volunteering—and letting them help. Whether it’s gathering donations of toiletries for soldiers overseas or making sandwiches for a midnight run for the homeless in your area, actions show your children that we are a country where we all help out when someone is in need.

And remember, one of the best ways to share information with your child is to contrast something that happens today with something you experienced when little. “When I was growing up, no one had cell phones...they were only for grown-ups.” Or my grandfather used to take us to baseball games as often as he could, and we would get Crackerjacks.” This begins an important story of who we are as Americans.

Why do you think dinner table conversation is so important?

The dinner hour is so important for many reasons. You are modeling eating habits that will be important for all of their lives, and you are establishing a bond for the family that is also life-long.

It's very important that dinner conversations be shared conversations. While parents should not air work frustrations or grievances against the boss, in addition to hearing about your children's day, they need to gain a sense of who their parents are, whether mom and dad both work, or one of them is an at-home parent and active volunteer, it's important that they hear your view of life (in moderation) as that provides for them guidance for the future.



Thank you, Kate.

To learn more about Kate Kelly and her take on the incredible stories of America's past, please visit www.AmericaComesAlive.com.

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