

Empowering Conversations with Your Child

When we think about what makes people friends with each other, a number of things come to mind. For example, our friends like us and enjoy spending time with us, as we enjoy them. And what is it we mostly do when we are together with our friends? Mostly we talk and listen to each other.

Conversations are the glue between people, the essential element in a strong relationship. Relationships wither without communication, and the very best form of communication is the conversation. Many parents fall into the trap of thinking that it is their job to talk and their child's to listen. Actually that's only half-right. It is also our job to listen and the child's job to talk. It's a wonderful thing when a parent and child can really talk to and hear each other.

It is important that parents intentionally seek out conversations about sports with their athletes. Here are some suggestions for how to engage your child in a conversation about sports.

- 1. Establish Your Goal—A Conversation Among Equals:** A conversation is something between equals. Kings didn't have conversations with their subjects. They told them what to do. Prepare yourself for a conversation with your child by reminding yourself that sports is her thing, not yours. Remember that you want to support her, to let her know that you are on her side. Your goal is not to give advice on how to become a better athlete. It should be to engage your child in a conversation among equals, one of whom (you!) is on the side of the other (her!).
- 2. Adopt a Tell-Me-More Attitude:** Brenda Ueland penned one of the most important essays on relationships ever written, *Tell Me More*: "When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life."

Adopt the attitude that you want your child to tell-you-more ("I really want to hear what you have to say."), and then listen to what he has to say—even if you don't agree with it or like it—and you will begin to tap into what Ueland calls the "little creative fountain" in your child.

"If you are very tired, strained...this little fountain is muddied over and covered with a lot of debris...it is when people really listen to us, with quiet fascinated attention, that the little fountain begins to work again, to accelerate in the most surprising way."

Think of your conversation with your child as an Olympic event with judges. A conversation that rates a 9 or a 10 is one in which the child does more talking and the parent more listening. Set your goal before you start, and go for it.

- 3. Listen!** In many instances you may know exactly what your child can do to improve. However, this is a conversation, remember? Your goal is to get your child to talk about her sports experience, **so ask rather than tell**. Save your tellings for another time.
- 4. Use Open-Ended Questions:** Some questions lend themselves to one-word responses. "How was school today?" "Fine." Your goal is to get your child to talk at length, so ask questions that will tend to elicit longer, more thoughtful responses.
 - o "What was the most enjoyable part of today's practice/game?"
 - o "What worked well?"
 - o "What didn't turn out so well?"
 - o "What did you learn that can help you in the future?"
 - o "Any thoughts on what you'd like to work on before the next game?"

5. **Also ask about life-lesson and character issues:** "Any thoughts on what you've learned in practice this week that might help you with other parts of your life?" Even if you saw the entire game, the goal is to get your child to talk about the game the way she saw it, not for you to tell her what she could have done better.
6. **Show You Are Listening.** Make it obvious to your child that you are paying attention through use of nonverbal actions such as making eye contact as he talks, nodding your head and making "listening noises" ("uh-huh," "hmmm," "interesting," etc.).

Listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child! Ueland again:

"Who are the people, for example, to whom you go for advice? Not to the hard, practical ones who can tell you exactly what to do, but to the listeners; that is, the kindest, least censorious, least bossy people that you know. It is because by pouring out your problem to them, you then know what to do about it yourself."

7. **Let Your Child Set the Terms:** William Pollack, MD, author of *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, notes that children have different "**emotional schedules**" that determine when they are ready to talk about an experience. Forcing a conversation right after a competition (when there may be a lot of emotion) is often less successful than waiting until the child gives an indication that he is ready to talk. Boys may take longer than girls to talk about an experience, so look for prompts that a child is ready. And conversations don't have to be lengthy to be effective. If your child wants a brief discussion, defer to his wishes. If he feels like every discussion about sports is going to be long, he'll likely begin to avoid them. And don't be afraid of silence. Stick with it and your child will open up to you.
8. **Connect through activity.** Sometimes the best way to spark a conversation is through an activity that your child enjoys. Playing a board game or putting a puzzle together can allow space for a child to volunteer thoughts and feelings about the game and how he performed. This is especially important for boys, who often resist a direct adult-style of conversation.
9. **Enjoy:** The most important reason why you should listen to your child with a tell-me-more attitude: Because then **she will want to talk to you**, and as she (and you) get older, you will find there is no greater gift than a child who enjoys conversations with you.