

# TIPS FOR *more meaningful* CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR *middle schooler*

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## 1 keep it simple during transitions

Most kids need time to rest and make the transition from school to home. Avoid asking challenging questions during these transitional times. It's far more difficult for anyone to thoughtfully recount the day during transitions or while multitasking (e.g., unloading a backpack, fixing a snack, etc.). Instead, keep your questions simple, and save the more challenging question for when you are home and settled together. For example, you might greet your child with, "I'm so happy to see you! I can't wait to hear about your day."

## 2 seize the moment

This may sound easy, but for many parents, it's not. And your middle schooler's schedule can get extremely busy too. In the hustle and bustle of everyday life, 10 or 20 minutes per kid can be hard to find. Consistently giving your child this "special time" can help her feel secure as one of your highest priorities, and lay the groundwork for her to trust you with her thoughts and feelings. When children feel connected to their parents, they're more likely to open up and tell about lunchtime dynamics or how they really feel about school.

## 3 shape the environment

Create a calm, low-risk space to talk about the day. Sit down, face-to-face, and show your child you have time to listen. You can even share a snack. Try to reduce potential interruptions (e.g., texting or answering phone calls, etc.) that might make your child feel like she is competing for your full attention or that there's an audience of siblings.

## 4 model good active listening skills

Now more than ever, your child is expected to pay full attention when someone else is talking. Teachers, counselors, coaches, etc., want to make sure that what they say is understood. Demonstrate what good listening looks like, in addition to how it sounds. After your child is finished telling you something, repeat back part of what was said. Then follow-up with a related question: "I know you really studied for that humanities test, but still found it tough. Do you think you'll do anything different next time?" When you ask your child questions about what she's said, you're encouraging her to ask questions to show that she's been listening or when she hasn't quite heard or comprehended someone.

Parents often wonder how to get their kids to talk to them more about school. After all, there's so much that goes into getting your kids ready for school, you should at least be able to get more than a "fine" out of your kid(s) when you ask, "How was school?" ...right?

Drawing on techniques from speech & language therapy, I've pieced together the following tips that can be useful to facilitate more satisfying communication with your middle schooler.

## 5 ask better questions

If you ask your child a question that can be answered with one word, then you'll probably get a word-word response. Try the following to get and keep the conversation going:

**Specific open-ended questions** encourage your child to describe how parts of the day were spent. Avoid asking, "How was school?" and try asking questions like: "What were the best and worst parts of your school day? Easiest and hardest?" This helps with recall and sequencing, two key skills that can be compromised when fatigue sets in at the end of a long day.

**Questions that have numbers** will definitely get more than a one-word response. Try, "Who are three people that you talked to today?" or "Tell me two kids who have lockers near you."

**Factual questions** are great for getting more details. For example, you might say, "I know your class size is bigger than it was last year, what's that like?"

**Questions that require visualization** can be fun and give you insight into the classrooms your child spends her days in. You might ask, "If I walked into your \_\_\_\_\_ classroom, what would I see?"

**Opinion questions** require your child to reflect on her thoughts, experiences, and emotions. Consider reading the next book she is assigned to read in ELA with your child. You may be surprised to find that your tween or teen still likes being read to! You can take turns reading. Then be critics together and replay the highlights. What did you each like or dislike about plot and the characters? You could ask if the characters are people she'd like to hang out with (or not) and why.

**Hypothetical questions** help engage creativity and abstract thinking: "If you did today over, what would you do differently?"

**Forced choice questions** are great if your child is struggling to communicate due to speech and language weaknesses or if he's just simply apprehensive to open-up. You might ask, "Which class did you like better, math or science?"

## 6 never give up

Many kids clam up around their parents during adolescence and may seem reluctant to communicate. Even if your child seems uninterested, try to talk together as much as possible. It takes ongoing practice for your child to be comfortable and used to speaking to familiar and unfamiliar people of all ages.

Remember:

"The way we talk to our children becomes their inner voice."

-Peggy O'Mara