

Family Communication: 42 Discussion Starters to Keep You in Touch



by Karen Stephens

We assume kids and parents know each inside and out. But you never know exactly what someone else thinks or feels until you ask. So this column offers discussion starter questions to help parents and kids get know each other better.

Does your child know what you take in your coffee? Do you know his favorite ice cream topping? Do you know what stresses your child? Does he know what upsets you? What's your child's nickname at child care or school? Do the kids know what *your* childhood nickname was — and why?

There are endless details families can learn about each other if we take the time to notice and ask. When we discover the details, parents and children consider others' perspectives. Answers give families a clue on how well they know each other. Playful discussion helps family members become aware of how sensitive — or insensitive — they are to each others' individuality and unique needs, wants, interests, and preferences. Most importantly, answers shared during discussion increase family openness and trust. Regular discussions remind us to make a conscious effort to notice and respond to the little — but important—details of each others' lives. Conversing with children, asking about their thoughts and feelings, communicates that we take kids seriously as “their own person.” That's critical for formation of self-identity and self-esteem.

Regular family communication should happen throughout life, beginning with early childhood. Once children are able to verbally express ideas — usually by three or four years of age, parents can pose questions as discussion starters. As children mature and age, gear questions to their expanding experience and development.

At this column's end are two lists of questions to use as discussion starters. One set is for parents to answer about children; the other is for children to answer about parents.

There are no set rules for this communication activity. Questions listed in the children's section can be asked of parents and vice versa. And don't feel pressured to discuss all the questions at once; occasionally, select a few. That will keep communication going over time. Children's responses will take on interesting spins as they grow.

You can use the questions individually with each child or the family can discuss them as a group — whether at the dinner table or during a car ride. Elementary school-age children may like to write questions and answers. It's a great way to communicate through e-mail, especially during a parent's business travel or when parents live in different households.

To put a playful spin on discussion, family members can first “guess” what each other's answer will be and then compare to see if they're correct. For instance, a parent may say, “I think chocolate sprinkles are your favorite on ice cream. Am I right?” The child can then confirm or correct. Kids of all ages *love* the chance to tell parents when they guess right or wrong!

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I hope some of these discussion starters give you chuckles, and others prompt soul searching. Don't be surprised if some answers surprise or shock you! When perplexed by a child's answer, don't be shy about saying, "Tell me more." Explanations will reveal more than the actual answers. Heart-to-heart continued dialogue is what this process is all about.

Regular discussions remind us to make a conscious effort to notice and respond to the little — but important — details of each others' lives.

Questions for Parents to Ask Children

- What is your first childhood memory?
- Who is your best friend?
- What do you like to do with your spare time?
- If you could be a character on television, which would it be?
- Who are your favorite music recording artists?
- What do you like to do on Saturday mornings?
- What's easiest about being a kid? What's hardest?
- Who is a famous person you'd love to meet?
- What personal skill are you most proud of?
- Which is your favorite sweater?
- Who is your favorite child care or school teacher?
- What is something that really upsets you?
- Where is your favorite place in the house?
- If you could go anywhere, where would it be?
- What chore do you dislike the most?
- What scares you most?
- What do you like to do on vacation?
- What has been your biggest disappointment?
- What is something you really like about me as a parent?
- What is something you'd like me to do more often with you?
- What would you like to change about your bedroom?

Questions for Children to Ask Parents

- What is your best childhood memory? Worst?
- What is your favorite hobby?
- Who is your best friend?
- How did you meet my other parent?

- What was your favorite subject in school?
- What relaxes you?
- What's your favorite part of the newspaper?
- What makes you upset?
- What's best about being a grown-up? Hardest?
- Did you have any bad habits as a child?
- When you were little, what got you in trouble with grandma and grandpa?
- What food do you hate?
- Who is a famous person you'd love to meet?
- What game or sport do you like best?
- What is your favorite family celebration?
- What would be a boring vacation?
- What is the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you?
- What's the funniest thing that ever happened on a family vacation?
- What's easiest about being a parent? What's hardest?
- What is something you think is really special about me?
- What is something you would like to do more often with me?

No one loses in family discussions; in fact everyone wins! And the list of things to talk about can go on and on. Information that comes out during communication is the reward the whole family reaps. Keep talking to stay in touch!

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.