

Dinner Table Discussions: The Importance of Family Communication

By Jodi Helseth, MA, LPC

A chat over chili. A discussion over dessert. A talk during a taco dinner. Call it what you will, but there is no comparison to the quality communication during a meal. Especially in this day and age when free time is a bit of an anomaly.

Time's Hard To Come By, Use It Wisely

We all eat, so why not use meal time more wisely. That doesn't mean watching television, reading the paper or pecking away at a mobile email device. Rather it means using the time to decompress, look into the eyes of family members and loved ones, and converse. A good ol' fashion conversation. This is especially important when raising a family because a) the childhood years fly by too fast; b) times of focused attention are limited.

Invest In Your Most Important Stock

Our children represent us. They are the next generation, and will guide generations to come. They really are our most valuable investment – worthwhile in a variety of different ways. Like any good investment, children require patience, understanding and solid communication.

Set time aside to get to know your “portfolio.” Use family days as a time to just be together and hang out. Choose one Saturday a month and plan an activity for the morning or afternoon, or both.

When I work with children on development issues, I start with the parents. The guidance and time that a parent offers a child is unmatched by any other. And, the sooner it starts, the better.

When it comes to good communication skills, what is practiced at early ages – like 5 or 6 years old – will have bearing on the teen years. By the adolescent years, our children are pretty much set in their ways. It's never too late, but the earlier we can influence the better. Doing so will help balance the incredible amount of peer pressure in the teen years. If you can't talk with your children, or can't establish boundaries in elementary school, you are not going to be able to do so in high school.

It's not always the amount of time, it's what you do with it. Quality versus quantity. It may take 30 minutes, if they are good, focused and attentive minutes. Hold regular family meetings. Include all family members in the meeting agenda. Make it worthwhile for everyone too. Start out by telling a joke, or ask about what's top of mind. Keep it light-hearted but worthwhile. Family meetings don't happen nearly enough, many times because the notion of them can be intimidating.

Expression Is Okay. Really.

I remember fondly when my son came home with a mohawk. Obviously meant as a form of expression, he was looking for a shocked reaction. I didn't budge – didn't give him the reaction he was looking for. Instead, I asked him how he was doing, discussed his new cool haircut and

moved onto the business of the day. The conversation was low-key, easy-going and really quite fun.

It is important to have a sense of humor and to lighten up. Enjoy the parenting years because they go by fast. What might matter on Tuesday, may very well be forgotten by the following Tuesday. Try and have a forward-thinking view when it comes to the stressors of parenthood. As the saying goes, “Don’t worry. Be happy.”

Relating To Your Children While Standing Firm

There’s been much media coverage recently about underage drinking, lowering the legal drinking age, and parents allowing alcohol consumption in a controlled setting. It is important to understand that the latter sends a larger – and stronger – message, which may be detrimental to development.

Being a parent means setting limits - drawing a line in the sand, and staying on the appropriate side of it. It’s true that some things are negotiable – especially the older our children get – but some things absolutely are not. When you give into pressure, especially when it includes breaking rules, it supports an overall lack of respect. The child thinks, “What other laws or rules can be broken.” It comes down to trust and earned privileges. Make sure to set the appropriate precedent. Trust will drive this.

Children need to understand life’s biggest lesson: Cause and effect. When a rule is broken, there will be consequences. This extends to your child’s friends when they are under your supervision, or are in your house, too.

Communication and understanding starts with parents. And it is important to lead by example. Be resilient and strong and you’ll see beautiful returns.

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