

Communication 101

There are some basic dos and don'ts for encouraging your kids to confide in you:

First, set the stage for gaining your child's trust in confiding in you as early as possible. Habits begun at a young age are generally easy to form and tend to have staying power. Don't be critical when your child complains to you about a problem. If your initial impulse is to blame your son ("And what did you do to provoke Michael to hit you?"), he'll most likely think twice before sharing his problems with you again in the near future. Making assumptions like this can be off base and damaging to a relationship. Gather the facts before jumping to conclusions. By listening first, you're telling your child that you are on the same team and that you're there for him, although you may not always agree with his thoughts or actions.

To encourage your kid to use you as a sounding board or a confidant, it's helpful to have some shared time together. I've found with my own kids that bedtime lends itself to quiet thought and confiding. It's a time to wrap up the day, both emotionally and physically, and if your evening routine contains this ritual it becomes second nature to use it as talking time. I've also learned of my kids' feelings (sometimes more than I've wanted to) by taking walks with them. Strolling around the neighborhood lends itself to quiet moments, "weather talk", and confidences shared. Looking back, I wouldn't replace those moments with anything. So, set up a routine that periodically places you alone with each child, be it driving to ballet or football, bedtime tuck-ins, or pounding the pavement together. You'll be pleased with how quickly the silence is broken and thoughts and confidences are shared!

Also, try to be sensitive to those times when your child searches you out to talk. Mine had the uncanny knack of displaying emotional breakthroughs in the middle of important phone calls or brilliant ideas begging to be put down on paper. It's difficult to take the time in the middle of your own thoughts or work in order to listen to your kids, but if you don't take advantage of the moment, you may not have it again.

Now that you've set the stage, what do you do when they start confiding in you?

Listen, listen, and listen some more

Most of us have a tendency to want to jump in and fix things so that our children are not uncomfortable, in emotional pain, or worried. When we rush to the rescue the message sent is "You can't figure this out, so let me do it." Or, "You shouldn't have to experience indecision or confusion, and I'm going to fix it." Wrong message Mom and Dad — although your intentions are noble, you are depriving your child of learning how to deal with negative emotions or how to remedy the situation himself. Also, rushing in with a quick fix can be

interpreted as trying to talk kids out of their emotions, "You're overreacting, Jamie really didn't mean it that way!" Whether Jamie meant to hurt your child's feelings is not the issue—feelings are hurt and that is what needs to be dealt with.

Once you've listened, help your child to accurately label his emotions.

Most of us are adept at using psychological defense mechanisms to shield us from discomfort. For example, your son may come home from school and slam the door on his way to the bedroom. When you try to speak with him he either grunts loudly or ignores you, or perhaps yells that he's madder than a hornet. However, what may really be happening is that he's embarrassed for missing an easy foul shot that could have clinched the game for his basketball team. Is he really angry? Yep, but the more basic emotions are humiliation, embarrassment, and fear that he won't be a starter in tomorrow's game. Help him to sort out the difference between his surface feelings (anger, frustration) and those at the core of the problem (concern over what his coach and teammates will feel about him). Helping your child to label and interpret his emotions will insure that he's working on the true problem.

Now that you've listened and labeled, it's time for problem resolution

Notice that I'm not saying problem solving, as there may not be an acceptable solution for every problem. Sometimes our kids just have to learn to accept and to move on, and other times they'll learn to agree to disagree. Start by letting your child know that her feelings are normal, in fact you may remember feeling the same way yourself as a grade schooler when it seemed that the entire class was invited to a birthday party and you were left out. Reflecting, or mirroring, your child's feelings will validate that it's okay to feel hurt, angry, or left out when you've been snubbed or rejected by others. Help your child to develop options and alternatives as to how to handle the problem situation. Jump-start the creative process by sharing an idea or two. However, giving a list of 10 possible responses that your teenage daughter can use to heal a rift with her friends is inappropriate — one or two should grease the wheel — let her do the rest of the idea-producing, otherwise she'll forever be dependent upon you or others for generating solutions.

Ensure future communication

Two techniques that go a long way toward cementing your child's trust in you are:

Clarifying that even if the confidence shared is 'fessing up to an inappropriate behavior, (breaking a vase, sneaking out at night, using the phone when grounded) you are proud of your child for telling the truth. Let her know that you respect her courage for coming clean, and even though there will be a consequence for the misdeed, it will certainly be less than if you had found out about it on your own!

Be a good confidant. When your child tells you a secret, or shares feelings that are touchy, keep it to yourself. Don't be a gossip and let slip your son's crush on the gal sitting next to him in geometry class or your daughter's dream to be an astronaut. If the child asked you to keep the information to yourself — that's exactly what you must do, no matter how cute it is or how much Grandma would be tickled. Trust is so easily broken and so stubbornly attained!

Getting your kids to confide in you is tricky business, but if you are sensitive and patient they'll learn to trust your heart and your judgment!

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