

Parents Can Make a Difference

Tired of asking, "What did you learn in school today?"

Tonight in kitchens around the nation, parents will expectantly ask their children the eternal question: "What did you learn in school today?" and will probably receive the eternal answer: "Nothing."

Why is that? and what can parents do to elicit more substantive responses? The National Press Syndicate surveyed authors and educators for a recent article in an attempt to answer both questions. One theory that emerged is that students live in the present tense, and unless they have something tangible to show for their day - a picture or a scraped knee - they really can't remember what happened three hours ago.

Even those who don't forget might just be exercising their independence, especially during the middle school years. In other cases, a beaming mother with a plateful of cookies is pressuring kids to bear glad tidings. If they don't have good news to share, it's best to keep quiet.

Experts, however, say it's important for kids to talk at home about school, because that helps them learn how to participate in discussions at school and feel more comfortable when they are called on. So what can parents do? Here are a few suggestions:

- Know what you want to find out. If you just want to show interest, fine. But if you really want information, talk to the teacher so your questions can be more leading.
- Ask the type of questions that get kids thinking. "What was the best thing that happened today?" may get some strange answers, but it might start a conversation going. "What was the worst thing?" may inspire them to unload some of the hurts they might not usually talk about.
- Be specific. If you know what activities were scheduled that day, ask about them.

"What book did you take out of the library?" or "How did your science project go?" will get better answers than "What did you do in school today?"

- Take cues from the child's facial expression. If the face looks happy, say, "You look pleased with yourself" and wait for an answer. Similarly, if the child is glum, say "Something seems to be bothering you." Don't demand to know what happened. A pregnant pause may be the best conversation-starter.
- Let your child start the conversation. Listen to what the child wants to talk about, not what's on your agenda.
- Tell your child about your day. If you're enthusiastic about your day, your child may be enthusiastic about sharing his or hers. And if you goofed up at some point, ask your child for advice. Participating in problem-solving gives kids a feeling of power.
- Establish a routine for family discussions. When the whole family sits down at dinner and trades information, it makes everybody feel important to everybody else. It also establishes an expectation without putting a lot of pressure on anyone in particular.
- Finally, give the child an option not to talk about school. A simple welcome without a barrage of questions lets the children know you're there to talk if they want to. Chances are they'll come to you when they're ready.

The school really should be helping parents meet this perennial challenge. Some teachers review the day's events with small children just before dismissal. Many schools publish weekly newsletters that keep a running log of the week's highlights. Others specifically involve parents in the homework process. Don't be shy about asking your child's teacher for a little help.