

Asking All the Right Questions

by Rui Dionisio, Superintendent of Schools



“How was your day?” said a parent. “Fine,” said the child. How many times have we heard or been part of that conversation? Or, “What did you do at school today?” “Nothing.” As the father of three children, I have been there myself. These types of closed ended questions are conversation enders, not starters.

This theme popped up from several parents at back to school events a few weeks back. “It’s so frustrating. How can I have a better conversation with my daughter about how their school day is going?” and “Why doesn’t my son want to talk to me?” In most cases, don’t take it personally. Actually, it’s likely a combination of two things: adolescence kicking in and parents not asking the right questions.

That got me thinking about the lessons I have learned as a parent and educator, and reflecting on some of the best advice I received from other parents and colleagues I have learned along the way that I still use to this day. There are simple yet effective ways to open constructive dialogue with your child while figuring out what is going on at school and in their life. The power is in asking the right types of questions.

“What was the best part of your day and why?” Open ended questions discourage one word answers. Asking “What was the best part of your day and why?” promotes a focus on something positive, no matter how big or small. For example, “I got an A on my math test” or “I did something nice for someone at school today and I felt really good about it.” The important thing

here is don’t let your child off the hook. Give them enough wait time to reflect on their day and let them know they need to share at least one thing that was positive. This may take some getting used to but should become natural once you have these conversations each and every day.

“What are you thankful for?” “Gratitude is a thankful appreciation for what an individual receives, whether tangible or intangible. With gratitude, people acknowledge the goodness in their lives.” Harvard Health Publications

Asking this question invites children to reflect on what they are grateful for that they already have, not what they want. For kids, this may be their family, friends, pet, or a specific experience. Research has shown that being grateful for what we already have in our lives correlates to a greater likelihood of having a positive outlook on life. Practicing gratitude has shown to develop a more optimistic perspective on life. In *Praise of Gratitude*, by Harvard Health Publications at Harvard Medical School, provides ways to cultivate gratitude on a regular basis. There exists an incredible amount of research on how gratitude associates with our perspective. It’s important for our children to recognize the positive aspects of each day to frame a healthy balance and attitude toward life. I encourage you to take some time to review their work in this article.

“What was the most challenging part of your day and how did you handle that problem?” I love this question.

It provides insight into three important areas into what’s really going on and how you as their parent can guide your child:

1. *a specific challenge a child may be facing;*
2. *how do they perceive this obstacle; and*
3. *what are the ways they are handling this problem.*

These challenges can come in the form of academic, social, emotional, or all of the above. Hearing from your child on how they are feeling is extremely important in this process. A productive two-way dialogue is incredibly significant to help you as the parent understand what your child is dealing with and assisting your son or daughter in navigating their emotions and outlook on the issue. Do they see the problem they are grappling with as so insurmountable that it cannot be conquered or as a temporary obstacle they can overcome with proper guidance? How your child responds to this question gives you a sense of how he or she is doing, helps shed light on how they view the challenge, and whether or not they have the necessary skill set at the time to effectively address the issue on their own (or will it require the assistance from you as their parent or an adult at



school).

Facing challenges is inevitable and we cannot protect our children from ever confronting adversity. In fact, learning resiliency and how to overcome hardship helps build healthy young adults. Dr. Ginsburg, a pediatrician specializing in adolescent medicine, university professor of pediatrics, and the author of *Building Resilience in Children and Teens: Giving Kids Roots and Wings*, highlights the following seven areas to frame our conversations with kids on resiliency: competence, confidence, connection, character, contribution, coping, and control. I encourage you to click on the following article link, [Building Resilience in Children](#), to learn more about resilience and how to help your child recognize their abilities.

Learning is a process that takes time. How can we guide children to develop into positive, thankful, and resilient young adults who approach obstacles with the attitude that they can overcome anything thrown their way? Think about how you can use these conversations as opportunities to teach your child to have a positive outlook on life. Challenges in life are inevitable. How we handle them is up to us.

I would love to hear from you on the types of questions you ask to have productive conversations with your children. Please feel free to email me with your thoughts at rdionisio@verona-schools.org

