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FAMILY TIES

The Gift of CONVERSATION

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

With all the choices for Christmas presents this year, how about giving children the gift of conversation?

Conversation is defined as the verbal communication of thoughts and feelings. In a world in which communication is becoming increasingly electronic, direct talking time is decreasing. Good conversation is an important aspect of creating a collaborative family atmosphere, one that enhances children's growth and enables them to learn the lessons parents most want to teach. Sensitive parents focus on creating harmonious parent-child relationships and work toward establishing secure attachments between themselves and their children. This attachment, in turn, encourages cooperation and willingness to attend to parents' requests as their parents attend to them. Real conversations are an important part of this mix.

It's easy to converse with young children because they are eager to share their experiences, and they don't worry as much as older children about criticism and negative reactions. For parents of young children, the most routine event is fertile ground for a conversation. Storytelling isn't just about telling a formal story, it's about making a conversation out of ordinary, everyday happenings. For example, telling a young child about what a parent and other family members will be doing on a Sunday morning helps a child see how different activities fit into the whole family's needs and schedules.

When a parent talks about the rules and the reasons for them, children can understand why rules are important. Talking about the rules within a normal routine, and when someone hasn't just broken one, weaves these values into a child's world. Talking when everyone's emotions are calm increases the likelihood that your child will hear and take in what you are saying. Even a young child who doesn't understand all the words will catch the tone of voice and learn that there is a routine to follow. As a child gains greater

verbal understanding, clarity about the purpose of the rules helps the child to remember the rules and follow them.

Older children can be more cautious, involved in their own activities, and reluctant to give opinions that may trigger criticism. Parents are responsible, however, to create a climate where good conversation can flourish and to stimulate their child's thinking and reasoning. In her book, *Is Your Bed Still There When You Close the Door? and other ponderings*, Jane M. Healy, Ph.D., an educational psychologist, came up with some imaginative questions to spark family conversations:

If you could talk to animals, what would you try to find out?

Try to imagine what life would be like if you were the size of a mouse.

Imagine a world in which everyone looked alike.

What if suddenly all the people in the country woke up speaking different languages and no one could understand anyone else?

How would the world be different if people were born with wheels instead of feet?

Bible verses can be great conversation starters as well. Use Revelation 3:20, 21, for example. Ask, "What do you think God's throne is like? What would it feel like to sit next to God on His throne? What are some questions you want to ask God?"

The rules of a good conversation are that everyone listens to what each person says without interrupting, criticizing or putting down other's responses. These questions get people talking, but Jane suggests that it's up to parents to keep the conversations going in day-to-day life.

This year, why not give children the gift that keeps giving—conversation!

Susan Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.