



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

Tell Me A Story

Parents know the value of reading stories to their young children, but the importance of story telling doesn't end in early childhood. Talking about our daily stories is a great way to build an ongoing connection with your children, particularly during the teen years.

Our lives are an ongoing novel, made up mostly of routine events interspersed with crises, accomplishments and tragedies. However, it is those ordinary actions that define who we are and what we are becoming. Talking with children about our daily stories provides an opportunity to both educate and understand each other's worlds. It builds an emotional bond that defines who we are as parents and people, and as members of our families.

Parents know the value of communicating with their kids but are typically disappointed that their attempts to reach out only elicit responses of silence, "nothing" or "I don't know." Kids report that same frustration, feeling that their efforts are met by lectures, interrogations or criticisms.

Mealtimes provide the venue for these conflicts. Well meaning parents ask their children questions as a way to show interest and gain information. Many kids are suspicious of such questions. The result is a shrug of the shoulder or a brief non-answer. When kids do talk, they often feel that their parents use that information against them.

I actually heard about this technique when reading a book about the Kennedy clan. Each member of this large family was expected to come to the meal table with knowledge of the day's current events. Meal times were partly a discussion of news and political events. I've worked with many families who have adapted that approach in the following ways.

1. **Tell me a story about the most interesting thing you experienced today.** Each family member, including the adults, is expected to come to the dinner table with a story. It can be something that happened to them, someone else or something they read about.
2. **“Nothing interesting happened” is not an option.** Life presents us with an abundance of fascinating stories, if only we pay closer attention to what is going on around us. Some kids initially have a problem with this expectation, and it does take them a while to develop observational skills. When I start working with this approach, I’ll ask kids to complete a handout with various categories of items for them to observe. I’ll have them write down a few words under just one of the following categories: You, friends, other kids, adults, things you’ve read/heard/or watched, and other stuff.

In the first few weeks, kids typically have a really hard time reporting any “interesting story” that occurred under any of those categories. However, as we work together on their observation skills they come back with lots of stories about stuff going on in their lives.

3. **Understand and don’t judge.** These dinner stories are not the time for parents to discipline or lecture. If you start this routine with your family, expect your kids to start off with stories about other kids, current events or other neutral topics. If you want your kids to tell you their more personal stories, then you need to listen and try to understand without reacting in ways that inadvertently punish your child’s openness.

A teenager recently told me that his “story of the day” was about his best friend getting his driver’s license. Rather than using this story as an opportunity to lecture her son about driving, the mom told about her experiences in failing her driving test three times! Her son was fascinated by his mom’s revelations, and this conversation stimulated a long conversation about his mom’s teenage years!

4. **Adults also participate.** You need to be a good role model in story telling, so parents need to tell their “most interesting story” of the day as well.

5. **Acknowledge and build upon small successes.** This approach will feel a bit awkward in the beginning, so don't get discouraged. It will take a while for all family members to develop this story telling habit and actually to think about their "story of the day" before dinnertime.

One of the nicest things about being a parent is the bond that develops with your child. You can strengthen that connection when all family members are open, real and share what is really going on in their lives.

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