

3 Ways to Make Conversation With Kids

Who knew talking to a 5- (or 15-) year-old could be so hard? When Minecraft, Lego sets, and “Whew, summer reading, huh?” don’t break the ice, here are some trusted tactics from the pros—including a preschool teacher and a theater director.

1. Do Some Reconnaissance.

If you’re going to be with a child you haven’t seen in a while, a little preparation can help lay the groundwork for a good conversation. Before the visit, ask the parents about what’s going on in their child’s life. That way you aren’t starting with “What are you learning in school?” when the kid is, say, having a difficult year. Instead, you can engage her on a specific topic—soccer, for example, or horses or lacrosse. Knowing a few tidbits in advance might lead you to say, “I heard you saw a great movie last weekend. Can you tell me about it?” The same strategy may work for your own kids if they are young or tend to be shy, or if you’re going to visit someone they haven’t seen in a while. I’ll say, “Oh, Aunt Caitlin is going to want to hear about your gymnastics—and, by the way, you may want to ask her about her vacation.” —*Christiana Mills*

2. Be Into What They’re Into.

You may have had the experience of feeling trapped in a conversation with a child who is talking endlessly about something you don’t care about. When my son was 7, he became interested in HTML code. I’m not really a computer person, so I resisted talking about it. But once I tried to learn why he liked it, I saw that he liked the way the code helped a programmer do so many creative things, like change colors or make columns. Not only did the subject then seem more approachable, but it also—more importantly—became a way for us to connect. —*Julie King*

3. Ask Open-Ended Questions.

Who hasn’t asked a teenager “How was your day?” only to get back a terse “Good”? (Another classic: “What did you do?” “Nothing.”) With older kids, you have to be a little creative—no yes-or-no questions. You’ll engage in more dialogue if you ask something like “What topic did you discuss in your core class today?” Then you can ask follow-up questions: “What was your opinion?” That said, if a kid isn’t opening up, it’s OK. Children deserve their space and privacy just like adults. We need to treat them with respect, even if they are not answering us the way we want them to. —*Chris Pegula*