

Can We Talk? By: Dr. John Trent

A simple way to deepen conversations with your kids

Have you ever had one of these conversations with your child?

"Hey pal, how was school?"

"Fine."

"Did you do anything interesting today?"

"Not really."

"Do you want to go out for pizza later?"

"I guess."

Sometimes trying to talk with your child can be torture—for both of you. But Dad, finding a way to open the doors of communication with your child is worth all the effort it takes on your part. And not just for the sake of your relationship. It could also be crucial to your child's future.

The ability to communicate is perhaps the most important life skill you can teach your child. A child who communicates effectively is better at solving problems and expressing emotions. He is more likely to be a leader, a peacemaker, a role model. Imagine the eternal impact your child can have when he knows how to talk about what he believes with clarity and confidence.

To help my daughters become better communicators, I came up with a simple game I call "verbal tennis." You can teach your children in just one evening.

You'll need three things. First, grab a tennis ball. (It doesn't have to be new. We used our dog's slightly chewed ball.) Second, find a small, inexpensive spiral notepad to use as a scorecard. And third, make sure you clear this with your wife, especially if you have a "No throwing balls in the house" rule.

The next step is to sell your children on this. If they're young, it probably won't be hard to convince them to play a game with you. You can also play for prizes like a frozen yogurt or similar treats. If you've got teenagers, you might have a tougher sell. I told my daughters (preteens at the time) that I was going to teach them a game that would help them interact with adults, make more money someday, and talk to boys. That last part got their attention!

Now, sit a short distance apart from your children and ask one of them a question. For example, I'd ask one of my daughters, "Tell me who your teacher is this year?" As soon as you ask the question, toss the tennis ball to your child. She answers the question, then tosses the ball back to you. Then ask a follow-up question, like, "Is she a hard teacher?" and toss the ball back.

The girls earned 10 points for every answered question. They needed 50 points to win their prize. Once they got used to the game, I challenged them to ask me questions. This is the real point of the game—to develop your child's ability to show interest in others.

In numerous clinical studies, people rated those who asked them questions as more interesting and better communicators than those who just talked about themselves or didn't talk at all. In short, we like people who ask us questions.

The next time you have adult friends over, encourage your child to practice verbal tennis with your guests. (No, they don't have to throw a tennis ball at Aunt Thelma. Throwing the ball with you gives them a mental image to use as they talk to others.) Give them plenty of opportunities to ask questions of other people and their confidence will grow rapidly.

In his beloved translation of the Bible, theologian J.B. Phillips paraphrased 1 Peter 5:7 to read, "Cast all your anxieties upon him, for you are his personal concern." What a wonderful picture of how Jesus connects with us. Indeed, Jesus often showed his concern for others by asking them questions. He did it with Peter, Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, and even with those who didn't believe he was the Son of God.

We all want our children to become adults who care about other people. When they know how to communicate, they are well on their way.

© Christianity Today Inc. Carol Stream Ill.

Reprinted with permission. This article first appeared in Christian

Parenting Today, Fall 2002