

# Skill-Building Opportunities

## Self Expression

**Question:** My son rarely shares how he feels about something. In fact, he rarely has an opinion about anything. How can I help him express himself and develop his ideas?

As your son continues to grow and mature, he'll discover who he is and what he believes. It takes time and will continue to change as he has new experiences and meets new people. Help your child develop his ability to express his ideas confidently by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

**Communicating** is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing. It is the skill of determining what you want to communicate and realizing how communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

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### Have conversations that go beyond “yes/no” questions.

- **Build on your child's experiences** by having discussions that encourage your child to say more than “yes” or “no.” When you encourage your child to take small steps toward expressing himself in a comfortable setting with you, you are supporting his communication skills and making them stronger.
- **Ask lots of open-ended questions.** Researchers call these “wh” questions: why, what, who or where questions. These questions ask your child to go beyond “just the facts” and think more deeply. Instead of asking: “Did you like your lunch today?” try asking: “What was your favorite part of lunch? Who had the best/worst lunch?”
- **Tune in to your child.** Listen and be responsive. Your child is more likely to share his thoughts and feelings with you when he feels you really care about his thoughts. Part of being responsive includes knowing when your child may just want to take some quiet time for himself and not talk.
- **Give examples of how to confidently express thoughts and feelings.** Let him know it's okay to have a different opinion than someone else: “My friend at work really liked the movie we saw together, and I didn't. We had a great discussion later about it.”
- **Repeat what your child says back to him, so he gets an idea of how his words are coming across:** “So what you seem to be saying is that you have fun playing soccer at recess, but you really don't want to play goalie anymore. Is that it?”
- **Encourage your child to express himself in many different ways.** Catherine Snow of Harvard Graduate School of Education calls for encouraging children to use many different forms of self-expression. Painting, drawing, music and dance are all great ways for your child to express his ideas, with and without words. Ask your child to write or tell a story about something he does or someone he knows. Then

read it aloud or repeat it back to him. Ask him if it sounds like what he was thinking or trying to say. Encourage him to think about how other people in his life might respond to the story.

## 2

**Make it fun.**

When you encourage your child to discuss his thoughts and feelings in a casual and fun way, he can develop confidence in his opinions without feeling judged or embarrassed. The following games are great ways to connect with your child and get him thinking and talking:

- **What Would You Do If...** Take turns coming up with answers for imaginary situations like “What would you do if you were king for a day?”
- **Best Thing/Worst Thing:** Tell your child the best and worst things about your day. Then ask him to share his best and worst moments. Dinner, bedtime or riding in the car are great opportunities for this kind of casual reflection.
- **Three Wishes:** Share what you would ask for if you had three wishes and why. Then ask your child for his wishes. This should help you see some of the things your child might be thinking about. From there, you can ask him to tell you more.
- **Story Shares:** Create your own family tradition by sharing stories from your life and encouraging your child to tell his own. Come up with original stories by giving prompts like: “Once upon a time there was a ...” and taking turns adding on.

## 3

**Use books or television as conversation starters.**

Books and television often cause emotional responses that provide good opportunities for sparking focused conversations between you and your child.

- **Start a family book club.** Ask your child to choose a book for the family to read. Set a date to discuss the book and ask questions like “What was your favorite part or character and why?”
- **Set aside time for a family movie night.** Everyone can choose a different movie and explain to the others why their movie should be the winner. Then take a vote and watch the winner’s choice. You can set up a schedule to watch the other movies or choose new movies another time.
- **Help your child think about effective communication by asking questions as you read or watch television shows and commercials.** Encourage him to think about the message the writers are trying to get across. Does he understand what that message is? How does it make him feel?