



# The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds

*Strengthening families through education.*



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## When Kids Won't Talk: Conversation Openers for Parents

We often advise parents to engage in conversations with their kids beginning at an early age, setting in motion a culture and tradition of candid, honest communication. The mission is to create a sense of safety and an "open door" policy that helps kids feel comfortable coming to parents with all sorts of things: their hopes, their dreams, their wishes, their successes and their failures.

As parents, we hope most of all that our children will come to us to discuss what's going on in their lives. There will be celebrations as well as struggles, accomplishments to complement challenges. And, of course, there will inevitably be the tough, confusing, perhaps even dangerous, situations. We want our children to share it all with us.

But look, this is easy for us to say! Think back for a moment on what it was like to be a child or teen. Think about how hard it was to start these conversations. Think about how much you wanted to leave the room when your parents tried talking to you about the tough stuff. We all know how hard starting a conversation with our children can be. How many times have we all received one-word answers to our questions? How well do we know the perennial eye-roll?



## 6 Ways to Start Conversations with Your Child



**Use open-ended questions when talking with your child.** If the question "How was your day?" results in a short response such as "fine," then try something different. To generate more conversation with your child, start by saying, "Tell me about your day."



**Begin with telling a story of your own.** "You wouldn't believe how hard work was today..." or, "I had the most difficult time talking with..." Even if you don't get a response, you are establishing a precedent for sharing your own experience. And, hopefully, your kid will want to share his or her story when the time is right.



**Try to talk while doing things** other than "just talking." Talk while you cook, or while you're running errands in the car. These rules are especially true for teenagers. Understandably, most teens recoil at the thought of a let's-sit-down-and-talk conversation. They're busy trying to prove to themselves and to everyone else that they can handle the world on their own. The face-to-face discussions are therefore interpreted as "serious meetings" ripe with critical commentary. Moreover, they can "smell" a parental lecture from a mile away. We're well aware

that a lecture is oftentimes the only way to get your point across. But first, try engaging in an activity that can set the stage for a natural, free-flowing conversation. A lecture isn't a lecture if it happens organically.



**Make a comment while watching TV or seeing a movie together**, especially if you think your comment can serve as a primer for a difficult topic. When witnessing an interpersonal conflict in something you're watching on the screen, you might say, *"Wow, do these things happen between people in real life?"* or, *"Who would get into fights like that?"* Then, wait to see if your kid takes the bait.



**Ask for advice.** Yes, your kids are "just" kids, but those kids know more than you might realize. Plus, your now emboldened child will feel proud that you wanted his or her advice in a tough situation. You might try, *"You know how badly I feel about Mrs. Jones losing her mom. How can I help her feel better?"*



**Consider group conversations.** If you have more than one child, or if you and your spouse are having a conversation, invite others in the family to contribute. If there's a story on the news about bullying, for example, you might ask everyone in the room, *"What can be done to stop this sort of thing?"*

We know that no single technique is sure to work every time, but we encourage you to try a few repeatedly. Remember, conversations with kids are a bit like baseball: sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, and sometimes you're rained out. But keep playing, and eventually you'll start hitting it out of the park.

## Want to learn more about your child's mental health?

Be sure to check out our videos and podcasts.



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Dr. Gene Beresin is executive director of The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds, a full professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and senior educator in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital. He received a BA in music from Princeton University, and an MA in philosophy along with his MD from the University of Pennsylvania.

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