

Guest post: Six simple steps for incredible conversations with your kids

Jane Gilmour and Bettina Hohnen are clinical psychologists and academics with a specialist interest in neuropsychology. They're passionate about giving parents the tools to build great relationships with their children. In this guest post they share six steps to help you have incredible conversations with your kids.

By [Jane Gilmour and Bettina Hohnen](#) | Last updated Oct 19, 2021



Conversation lies at the heart of well-being, it strengthens relationships and with that comes improved mental and physical health, greater longevity, better academic results

and even a higher income. The bottom line? The capacity to converse meaningfully means a longer, better life so as a parent, teaching your child how to form strong relationships is the greatest gift you can give them. Of course, these skills don't form overnight (nothing worthwhile ever does) try these six steps and use them with patience and kindness at home and in time you will see your child learn about themselves and connect to others in a new way... and you will feel like a total rock star.

Step 1. You Say It Best When You Say Nothing At All

Sshhh ! The first step is practical, do-able but it might surprise you. One of the most important steps in having incredible conversations is to leave space for your child to talk. Staying quiet might seem a counter intuitive tip, but it is the foundation of good communication. If your child falters as they are talking, say something like 'tell me more' but try hard not to stop their flow (keep a finger on your lips if you have to). After a bit you might paraphrase back what you've heard your child say. This does two things: first it shows your child you've really heard them and second, they can 'listen back' to their own thoughts, ideas and dilemmas without judgement, and that develops self-awareness which is a very hot topic in the mental health literature right now.

Step 2. I'll Be There

This step is gold dust. Imagine your child told you they were left out at playtime, which is very hard to hear as a parent, because all we want is for our kids to be happy - but life isn't always like that, so we have to buckle up and absorb the tough times with our child. Parents sometimes tell us they don't know how to react when their child tells them something upsetting but here's what to do – just be with them when they tell you something hard to hear. In practical terms, it means avoid shutting down talk of hard emotions and experiences.

Brain science shows that experiencing and naming difficult emotions with a trusted person is key to developing emotional literacy and life-long well-being. Some parents want to erase it ("Don't say that!"), others try and problem solve ("Ok, here's what you do tomorrow at break...") but actually your best initial move is to empathise, which in this case would go something like this; "That sucks, it sounds really hard." There is very strong evidence that showing empathy in this way is an important bonding stage in relationships. Once the emotion is shared, then and only then you might go to problem solving (if it is a persistent problem) but more often than not, making a connection using empathy is all that is required.

Step 3. Best Mistake

The next step is a mindset shift, and a really powerful one. Wrap your head around this: listening is not the same as

agreeing. It is a liberating game changer for family relationships. When your child makes a mistake (like being mean) resist the urge to tell them off in a raised voice because that is likely to make them feel ashamed. In any intense emotional state the brain just can't think or reflect because all the brain activity leaves the thinking part of the brain (frontal lobes) so that it can activate the feeling part of the brain (the amygdala). You can still help your child understand what's OK and what not OK without using a harsh tone. Having these conversations in a measured and warm context means your child will be able to hear you because calm brains communicate best.

We know this is true because neuroscience tells us so. Having made a mistake, kids are very likely to know already that they have messed up, so it's often redundant to tell them that, but if you offer a place to talk about it then you give them the chance to learn and understand at a much deeper level. Not sold yet? Here's the clincher for pre-teen parents... your relationship with your teenager is the best means (and sometimes the only means) you have to parent your adolescent child as they explore the world without you. If your teen has learnt that they can bring their mistakes home (and not just be punished for them) then you can help them figure out what happened and how it happened and so they are more likely to avoid similar issues in the future. Conversation is a 'sorting space', as neuroscientist Dan Siegel once said. Think about it like this: when you do a jigsaw, you need to lay all

the pieces out on a table, look at them carefully and sort through them so that you can make sense of the picture and piece the puzzle together.

Step 4. (You Make Me Feel) Mighty Real

Conversations take many forms, but one key tip is to use real things as an analogy or metaphor, particularly for pre-teens. This is because children find it hard to relate to abstract concepts and they sometimes lack the vocabulary to express an idea, although they can surely experience and inhabit that same idea. Drawing it out is a superb way of helping younger kids describe and understand the world because it's perfect for their 'concrete' stage of development, there is less demand on memory and it is (dare we say it?) a bit more interesting.

Here's an example to illustrate what we mean and one that even very young primary school aged kids will be able to grasp. At the top of the mountain is the best you've ever felt, and right down in the deep pit at the foot of the mountain, is the worst. Ask your child to make a mark anywhere from the summit to the bottom of the pit to show how they feel right now. You can explore this idea further using your 'visual prop' by asking about a time they were in the pit (remember Step 2), what would have to happen so that they moved just a tiny bit up towards the summit, how they felt yesterday and so on. You don't need expensive art materials; you can draw a line with

shaving foam on the side of the bath, use a strand of spaghetti at teatime but make it a 'real thing' because that way you are much more likely to engage your child in the ideas you are discussing. It opens up a whole new world of meaningful communication.

Step 5. Every Breath You Take (They'll Be Watching You)

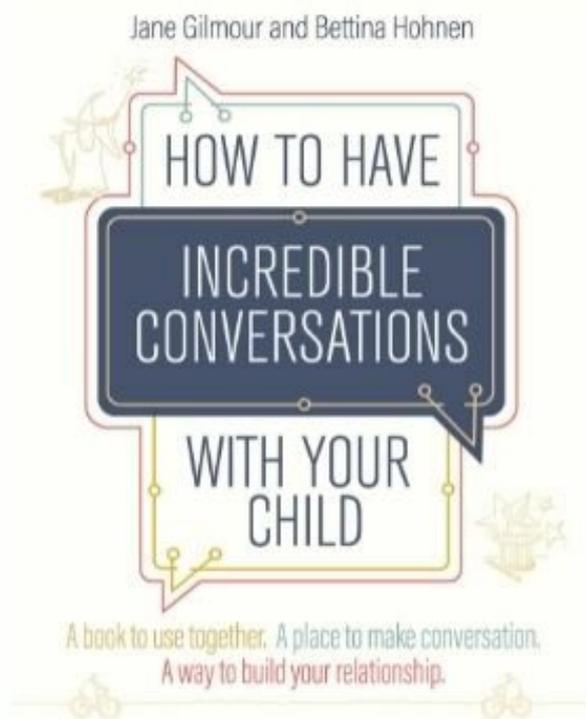
However old your kids are, they watch and learn from you as you go about your day to day business (yes even teenagers, it's just that they are brilliant at hiding it). Many years of research reminds us that saying 'Do as I say, not as I do' is pretty pointless. Teaching by example is one of the most powerful parenting techniques around, so step five in your incredible conversation toolkit is to model the very conversation skills you want your child to learn.

Some days, mix -it up at school pick-up and tell them about your day, rather than fire questions at them about theirs. If your child is calm, in a good spot, perhaps ready to talk but not sure how to begin, describe your dilemmas and difficult emotions as well as your triumphs. That way you're teaching them that everything is on the conversation agenda in your family (though of course the degree to which you share will be moderated as you are the grown-up in the conversation).

Step 6. Don't Give Up

Communication skills are a work in progress so unless we practice, we can't develop these abilities. Infants and toddlers only become fluent in language if they hear it and have had the chance to practice it regularly with you. The same is true for learning the art of meaningful conversation - the sort of conversation that cements relationships. Repeat, repeat, repeat is the mantra of any neuroscientist describing skill formation. It takes about four months to create a good habit so use these six steps to create a conversation habit with your child and ta-dah! a few years down the line you will have helped your young person become self-aware and form life-long healthy relationships with partners, friends and colleagues.

Not every conversation will go smoothly even if you get it 'right' in terms of the tone and setting we have described in these six steps. Sometimes, it will go pear shaped anyway but every single genuine bid that you make to connect with your child will be filed carefully in their 'how to form a relationship' database. It all counts, it all adds up and it all matters. So pat yourself on the back for having had a go or better yet notice together with your child that you both tried even if it didn't go to plan today and... Boom! You've just had an incredible conversation.



Jane Gilmour and Bettina Hohnen are clinical psychologists and academics with a specialist interest in neuropsychology. Their new book, [How to Have Incredible Conversations With Your Child](#), is out 21 Oct published by Jessica Kingsley £14.99. See their Instagram page [@incredibleconversation](#) for more details and for more advice listen their podcast [Our Kids in Mind](#).

Related topics

Related content