

## “BUILDING BETTER CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR KIDS”

by Jean Becker

Conversations with our children are one of the best ways for us to know them, to understand them, and to stay close to them. Even though they may communicate through behavior, body language, and moods, these one-sided methods only tell part of the story, and can be tricky to interpret.

Young children handle their uncertainties with creative innocence by confiding in a pet, or rehearsing their words with a teddy bear, or even telling all, to a baby sister who doesn't even know what they are saying anyway. Older children and teens often rely on friends as a sounding board for advice, answers to questions, and ideas to solve problems. If you are wondering how you fit into your child's world of communication, take this simple quiz to see where you stand.

### TAKE THIS TRUE OR FALSE QUIZ AND START THE CONVERSTATION

1. My child initiates a conversation with me more than two times a day. T F
2. I sometimes feel awkward when I talk about sensitive matters. T F
3. I am caught off-guard when my child asks a tough question. T F
4. I want to help my kids express themselves better. T F
5. I know what's on their mind and where they are hurting. T F
6. I want to know what my kids are planning to do today and tonight. T F
7. My kids easily admit to a mistake or transgression. T F

8. I want my kids to ask me about sex rather than ask their peers. T F
9. I want my kids to believe I am the best person to talk to about anything. T F
10. My kids rarely tell me that they appreciate what I do for them. T F

If you answered true to one or more quiz questions, read on to learn about the “Conversation Companion,” a simple system of messages and replies that guides parents and children into better communication through the written word.

Writing what you want to say is another way of having a conversation to express what’s on your mind. Whether it’s happy or sad, or contrite, it’s easier to write it than to say it out-loud. Writing it could be a way that is as relaxed as conversation, without punctuation, without searching for correct spelling. It should be open and honest with the understanding that it will be read and responded to by a parent. It should have no right or wrong. It should not resemble schoolwork.

A “CONVERSATION COMPANION” could be a simple sheet of paper with the word message at the top, followed by empty lines for writing. Half way down the page is the word reply, also followed by blank lines. Your child writes a message. It can be in the form of a question, or a statement, even a thought. It can ask for permission, guidance, help, recognition and understanding. It can express wonder, wishes, thoughts, desire, sorrow, and appreciation.

This simple sheet of paper is then placed in a designated place. A neutral location where it is visible to the parent, not hidden away in a child's room, works best. This message is an invitation and an obligation for parents to respond with a reply that addresses the concerns of the child. In this written dialogue, the child becomes more conversant with the written word.

#### HERE ARE TEN BENEFITS

1. Children like to use the “CONVERSATION COMPANION,” since it is a positive way of getting some attention, and so they are likely to communicate more regularly. As the parent has time to think about a reply, the words will be more thoughtful, and less judgmental.
2. As you and your child become more familiar with this method of messages and replies, awkwardness in expressing yourselves will diminish.
3. When a child asks a tough question, you will have time to think about your reply and not be caught off guard.
4. As your children write messages on a regular basis, they will learn to express themselves better and many times as a bonus, improve their writing skills.
5. As your children become more accustomed to writing down their thoughts, they will reveal what's on their mind and identify where they are hurting.
6. When your children are unsure about the safety or morality of their plans, they might not tell you in voice, but hide behind a mask by writing it down on paper as a rehearsal.
7. It can be difficult for you and your child to admit a wrongdoing or a transgression. It's a lot easier to write it down on paper.

8. Some children are embarrassed to talk about sex and more likely to ask you about it if they can write their questions, rather than saying them out loud.

9. Your children will know that you are the best person to talk with if they can always depend on you for a response.

10. You will know that your children appreciate you because it will reflect in their communications just as they will recognize your love in your responses to them. As you both become accustomed to thinking about what you want to say, you and your child will overcome the use of hurtful words blurted out in the heat of an argument and practice a mutual respect for each other.

The conversation starters listed below have helped other children to be successful in written conversations and are ideas to help you and your children get started. They may also make up some of their own.

- I feel\_\_\_.
- I wish\_\_\_.
- I wonder\_\_\_\_\_.
- I hope\_\_\_.
- I need\_\_\_\_\_.
- I like\_\_\_.
- I don't like it when\_\_\_\_\_.
- Did you see what\_\_\_\_\_.
- Did you know why\_\_\_\_\_.
- Do you understand\_\_\_\_\_.

- Do you care\_\_.
- Do you think I could be\_\_.
- Do you think I could go\_\_.
- Would you please teach me to\_\_.
- Would you please explain\_\_.
- When can I\_\_.
- I forgot to tell you that\_\_.
- What should I do about\_\_.
- I am so sorry\_\_.
- Thank you for\_\_.

Many children enjoy reading and writing with the use of a computer. Messages can also be written and e-mailed to their parent and their parent can reply via e-mail.

The message and reply system in the “Conversation Companion” is meant to be shared with a parent and does not violate a trust as is sometimes perceived in use of a diary; nor is it just the “good stuff” as in a journal; but rather it strengthens the bond between you and your children.

In a short time, your children will be more comfortable telling you about themselves and with practice will achieve the ultimate benefit; thoughtful, comfortable, and honest verbal dialogue.