

INSIGHTS

Moving beyond “How was school today?” with your adolescent



Traditionally parents are far more involved in their children's education in primary school than in secondary school. While secondary schools still welcome parent engagement they generally offer fewer opportunities for hands-on parent involvement particularly in curriculum areas.

Also, secondary school students generally want to put some space between them and their parents when it comes to their schooling. But that doesn't mean that parents should take a backseat when it comes to being involved in their young person's education. It means you need to be pro-active and perhaps smarter about how you go about it than in the primary school years.

That means we need to move well beyond “How was your day at school?” to hold interesting conversations about a wide range of topics and issues that are pertinent to your young person.

Here are some topics that you may want to cover that will give you a broader view of your young person and his or her life at school:

Talk to young people about achievement

If your main achievement message for young people is along the lines of “You need to apply yourself” you may find that it begins to fall on deaf ears. Young people tend to tune out from these simplistic, single track messages that perhaps past generations of parents used. Better to have interesting conversations about success and achievement that don't necessarily focus on your young person. For instance, a discussion about how their favourite sports star or performer would prepare for an event or performance can provide them with great insights and can have significant application to their own lives. Success and achievement comes in many shapes and forms, not just in simple academic performance. Broad discussions about the strategies, attitudes and mindsets that contribute to success are great for young people to hear at home.

Talk about their mental health and well-being

“How's your mental health?” is a question your young person should hear regularly from you. However, you need to create some context around good mental health otherwise this question will be met with a meaningless one word reply. Good mental health covers areas such as sleep, emotional well-being, friendships, relaxation and the ability to switch off from the stresses of every day school life.

Talk about friendships and relationships

Social success is a significant contributor to a young person's well-being so it's a topic close to their hearts. However, talking to young people about their relationships is always challenging. You need to walk a fine line between being interested in their friends without being seen as invasive and over-controlling. One conversation that most parents should have with young people involves the differences between being in a friendship group and being a member of a clique. The latter is controlling and feels restrictive, while the former is inclusive and generally feels right. It's also a good idea to talk about the adult relationships that they have including how they get on with their teachers, coaches and others in mentoring roles.

Talk about values and attitudes

“You need to do what’s right, not what’s easy.” This is an integrity statement that my children heard a great deal from home during the secondary school years. Values are the moral compass that guide young people’s behaviours when you are not around so it’s important that young people know what their parent’s values are. Sometimes we can be subtle, “Is that showing respect to your teachers?”, while at other times we need to be firm and upfront about the values and subsequent behaviours we expect from you people. This is can be tricky ground, but an area we shouldn’t neglect.

Talk about their interests



It’s imperative to talk to young people about what their interests are such as music, hobbies and leisure activities as well as their life at school. Most young people are focused on the present (*I want to hang with my friends today and homework gets in the way*), while parents usually take a long term view (*you need to study hard so you can get a good job*). These built-in tensions can be alleviated by focusing on a young person’s current interests and will allow you to have more difficult conversations when needed.

How to get conversations started with young people

- 1. Get moving together.** One way to get a conversational clam to open up is to do something together. A walk, a game or shared activity can sometimes loosen a young person’s tongue.
- 2. Make the most of mealtimes.** Shared mealtimes should be non-negotiable for everyone in a family. Turn all digital devices off and start talking about stuff. If mealtimes are just a pit stop then it may be time to slow down and get some conversation going.
- 3. Create a talking space.** It’s useful to have at least one place you know that you can have a chat with your young person. Whether it’s a favourite chair, a particular part of the house or just in the peace and quiet of their bedroom. Work out the best place for personal conversation with your young person and get in the habit of spending some time with your young person there.
- 4. When all else fails, drive!** The humble automobile can make a great conversational space for parents and teens, particularly when you sit shoulder to shoulder. Keep the radio off and buds out of ears and you’ll increase the likelihood of some idle chatter.



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