

Getting on the Same Page: Connecting with the Adults in Our Children's Lives

Maybe it does take a village to raise a family. After all, think of how many adults populate our children's lives, with the potential to make lasting contributions, in any direction. There are, of course, the teachers who have our children during their most alert hours, charged with the modest task of growing keener minds and warmer souls; coaches who work on building the physical and mental fortitude needed to win; physicians invested in their patient's practice of healthy habits from an early age. And the list goes on – creative arts teachers, school tutors, camp counselors, religious leaders, relatives, and even employers who give our children some of their first work experiences.

It is not an easy task as parents to be “on the same page” with the many adults shaping our kids' lives. The potential for miscommunication is huge and so are the consequences. Get a bunch of parents together for any social occasion, and in the relaxed conversation of “What's new?” you will hear stories unfold of frustrations regarding a child's life and a mis-empowered adult. Consider the recent story shared by a friend: a high school freshman and her math teacher were at odds because he thought she cheated (she adamantly says that she didn't) and punished the student by refusing to call on her in class and lowering her grade. The student and teacher were unable to negotiate their differences, so the parents got involved. Positions were drawn, and there was the small but annoying logistical challenge of finding time to meet. Multiple meetings later, reconciliation was achieved but not without pain, stress, and parental intervention.

Most of us need a series of conversations with the adults in our children's lives – sometimes because our kids are stumbling, but often times we are simply unclear about something that matters to us as parents. We feel we need information, or we want to provide some helpful clues to understanding our child, or we just need reassurance that the path feels right. And so we need to ask some questions that will elicit useful feedback. Here are four starter questions that can engage our eclectic village in meaningful conversation. Namely:

- **Do we agree on the goals?** My son's baseball league had a coach who was an intense ex semi-pro player and he often shouted at the kids when errors were committed. For some parents, his high baseball standards, meticulous focus and drive to win were fine. For others, they simply wanted their son to enjoy the game, build some skills, and make a few friends. They viewed the coach as excessively critical. While the "goal conversation" was not had during the season because their children did not want to stand out, it was had afterwards. The coach is no longer part of the league because his goals and those of many parents were not aligned.

- **How well do you understand my child?** A friend recently despaired how her son's teacher "just doesn't get my son." Apparently, he is disorganized and sometimes leaves his completed homework at home. He arrives to class disheveled. His teacher interprets this to mean that he doesn't care. His mother sees it differently. "He cares deeply, and wants to do well. He is just disorganized and can't quite get it together. They read him wrong." A correct reading of our children is obviously necessary for effective management. A detached professional offers tremendous opportunity for objectivity and understanding, but he must be able to demonstrate an understanding of the child if trust is to be well-placed.

- **How does my child respond to your guidance?** We know as adults that different bosses can get different levels of performance from us. So too with our children. Different teachers, different tutors can help our children achieve varying levels of success. Especially in the formative years, it is helpful for parents to have their finger on this pulse and do some gentle guiding. Probing what the adult and child have learned about each other – what works and what doesn't – can yield valuable information for everyone.

- **Where do you see the biggest potential for growth?** We would like our children to feel encouraged by life and the particular gifts they bring. We want to

create a feeling of “yes.” “Yes, I can pitch”, “Yes, I can solve that tricky math problem,” “Yes, I can create good friendships when I seek the right people.” An impartial adult, who brings some of the same investment in our children, but not the blinding parental love, can be very helpful in identifying strengths, proclivities, and areas to build upon.

Finally, most social interactions benefit from a few rules, so here are mine. First, we should begin by doing our homework. Find out the facts. Assume that our precious child has some ownership if conflict exists. Example: when my son was in second grade, he was sent to the office to eat lunch by himself. I was girded for battle with the cruel lunch monitor who I was told loved Julia, the “teacher’s pet”. For my son, Julia existed solely to get boys in trouble. Before battle, I decided to once again probe what led to banishment and so I asked gently, “Is there anything, I mean anything, you could have done to cause the punishment?” “Well,” he admitted, “I did blow milk out my straw and I couldn’t help that it was pointing at Julia.” The teacher’s pet didn’t have to try very hard to get her revenge.

Another simple rule before engagement: *where possible be constructive, be concrete and define some baby steps to help mark progress.* We need to see adults as our partners. Specific and achievable goals are our means. Back to my son who was last in the principal’s office, he also plays clarinet. His teacher thinks he has talent, and loaded him with classical pieces causing his clarinet to go quiet. I called her to say, “He likes Billy Joel better than Beethoven so can you switch to jazz?” She was quite willing, and now the baby steps come in. As we resurrect his interest in the clarinet, I am no longer clinging to the thirty minute mandate. “Learn one piece this week,” I say, as he gently rediscovers his interest.

Asking the right questions in a positive and open-minded way to our village partners can open up the world to both our children and to ourselves as parents.