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# Table Talk That Goes Beyond “How Was Your Day?”

In most families, the bread and butter of dinnertime talk centers around the question, “How was your day?” In some families, this simple question opens the floodgates: Kids will talk about recess, or about a rebuke someone endured from a teacher, or about an intriguing moral dilemma that arose in class. But some kids will only respond with a one-word answer: “Okay.” In other families, one member grabs all the airtime and rattles off a string of anecdotes about what happened during the day; meanwhile, everyone else will be tapping toes, impatient to get a word in edgewise.

In this chapter, I give some suggestions about how to overcome these and other table talk challenges so that you can increase your family members’ desire to talk and also to listen to each other.

Even if you’re lucky enough to have family members who need little prompting to gush about their days, it can be interesting and fun to raise some other topics for discussion. A steady diet of “how was your day” questions can feel like eating the same meal night after night. So, like switching up the menu, it’s good to add some variety and surprise. Games can be used to extend the time families spend with each other and infuse table talk with a dollop of playfulness. Dinnertime is also an opportunity to talk about things that matter—items in the news or abstract issues that

encourage family members to think about what they would do in a similar situation.

The dinner table is also the primary place that families tell stories about parents and previous generations, stories that transmit the idea that we are all part of something bigger than ourselves. (Because this topic is so important, I'm giving it its own chapter: Chapter 7.)

## **ENCOURAGING TALKING AND LISTENING**

Sometimes getting your kids to participate in dinner conversation feels like a lost cause, but you'll be surprised at how easy it becomes when you use some simple, but effective techniques.

### **Asking questions that elicit more than a one-word answer**

Kids have many good reasons for answering their parents' questions with one word. It could be that they've been answering questions all day and now want a break, or they're so tired and hungry that one word is all they can muster, or they've got a lot on their minds and the question you've asked isn't interesting enough to change their focus. They could also be upset about something and don't want to share it, or they just plain don't feel like talking but wouldn't mind listening to *you* talk.

Of course, it's impossible to know what's going on if your child won't tell you, and that's the catch-22. Here are a few ideas that have worked with my children over the years, as well as with child patients of mine who are very prone to clamming up in a therapist's office. I can't guarantee that these ideas are foolproof or that each idea will work for every child every time. You know your child well enough to predict which, if any, of these approaches might help get the conversation flowing.

- Keep a "map" in your head of what you know transpired in your child's day, and ask questions that demonstrate that you have been paying attention. In other words, ask a question that shows that the details of your child's life matter enough for you to have remembered

them. For example, “I know that today was your first art class. What was it like?” or “Did you have a chance to play ‘monkey in the middle’ again at recess like you did yesterday? Whom did you play with today?” (This notion of keeping an updated map is a good idea with fellow adults as well. I know I find it maddening if my husband forgets to ask me about a big presentation and starts a conversation with a clueless, “How was your day, hon?”)

- As your day rolls along, try collecting small stories that might interest or amuse your children, such as something mischievous the dog did during the day or a funny exchange with a coworker. Later, when you reunite with your child, you might start with a story of your own. Often, this kind of modeling helps gets the ball rolling, and it shows your child that you are offering something before asking for something.
- Ask questions that require only one-word answers but not necessarily just yes or no. For example, “What did you like better today, math or reading?” “Who was most fun to play with today? And then who?” Sometimes, kids realize that they are offering information anyway and decide to fill in more of the details.
- In graduate school I was taught a saying about how to make certain behaviors, like one-word answers, less attractive to patients. The saying is “Spit in the soup.” That means, by predicting that your child is going to do the very thing that you wish she wouldn’t, you lessen the appeal of her likely behavior—so it’s like soup that’s been spoiled by spitting in it. For example, you might say “Sally, I want to ask you about your day, and I know that you’re only going to want to give me a one-word answer, but that’s okay; that’s all I really expect right now.”
- Take a break from asking questions and instead wonder out loud about parts of your child’s day without asking anything. “At noon today I was thinking about you because I knew you were trying out for the school play, and I was hoping that all the rehearsing you did last night made you feel confident.” Then just be quiet, and see if your child adds on to what you’ve started.

And, then there's the more direct approach. You can always ask your children to help you be better at having a conversation about their day. "I'm so excited to see you, and so interested in what you've been doing, what you're learning, and who you've played with, but often you don't seem to want to talk. Is there anything that makes it easier or harder for you to share some of your day with me?"

Your child might answer, "Yes, don't ask me so many questions!" Then you can wonder aloud what she might not like about your questions. If you figure it out, you might be on your way to changing the conversation.

## DEEPENING THE CONVERSATION

As my kids would certainly tell you, I can be a real pest when it comes to asking questions. My husband, a journalist, is no better. Since we both ask questions for a living, our kids have been interrogated, quizzed, and cross-examined within an inch of their lives. In my defense, I do try to ask a broad range of questions—some to get the facts, others that wonder about feelings, and still others to try to pivot around an issue by asking a question from a different perspective.

Some questions and responses are like oxygen, keeping the flame of conversation alive; others are sure to throw cold water on it. I'm sure I've thrown more than my share of cold-water on dinnertime discussions, but I aspire to be a human bellows. Here are some ways to keep a conversation alive.

Let's consider this simple exchange—likely happening at dinner tables across the country—to compare the two different types of communication. A parent asks: "What was the best thing that happened at school today?" The child responds: "Recess."

### Responses that shut down the conversation

- *Negatively judging your child's response.* "Didn't you learn anything in class today? Do you think school is all fun and games?"
- *Persuading or cajoling your child to consider a different response.* "Are you really sure that was the best thing about school today? I seem to

remember that you were going to have a parent come in today to read a story; wasn't that more fun than recess?”

- *Making the response a problem.* “Why were you so relieved to get away from class and into recess? Did something bad happen in class today?”

### Questions that fan the flames of conversation

- *Asking out of pure curiosity* and conveying that you want to understand your child's point of view. “Tell me more. What did you do? Whom did you play with?”
- *Asking playful questions that introduce a different perspective.* “If I had been a bee on the swing, what would I have seen?”
- *Asking your child to compare two experiences.* “How was recess today different from recess yesterday? Was there something that made it particularly fun today?”
- *Asking questions that prompt your child to talk about his or her successes.* “Did you do something during recess that you were particularly proud of or that you want to remember to do again?”
- *Asking questions that shine light on what's missing.* If your child talks about feelings, you might ask: “What were you thinking about?” If your child talked about today, you could ask about tomorrow or yesterday.
- *Inviting others into the conversation.* “Recess makes me think of taking a break during the day. What kinds of breaks did others take during the day? What are your favorite ways to relax and recharge during the day?”

And don't forget that you won't be the only one generating questions. Children are question-asking engines. I'm sure you know this from your own experience, but to give you an idea of *just* how much kids enjoy asking questions, consider this 2007 study: A researcher analyzed more than 200 hours of recordings of four kids, between the ages of two and five, talking with their caregivers. On average, the kids asked one to three questions per minute, or about 75 per hour!<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes it might be helpful to wonder out loud what it is you don't know. For example, "I'm not sure I really understand Snapchat. Could you tell me about it?" By embracing "not knowing," you may come up with some of the best fan-flaming questions.

## MANAGING CONFLICT

Once the talk starts flowing, conflict and fighting could erupt. Some families enjoy having animated discussions at the dinner table, airing out different political views or replaying an umpire's call at last night's ballgame. Jack, a middle-aged man, and one of three sons, reflected on his childhood dinners: "Fighting with Dad about the Vietnam War was a sport that we all looked forward to. We sharpened our wits at the table. My father made each of us feel that we were worthy opponents, and I liked that."

Speaking in a forthright way about differing opinions can make family members feel that each person's individuality is valued and that the table is a safe place to send up a challenge. But if you want to tone down the conflict at the table to make room for other types of conversations, here are some tips:

- *Agree to keep off the table topics that usually result in a fight.* It may be easier to discuss such issues as grades, curfew, and behavior problems *after* dinner—on a full stomach and once you've had a chance to reconnect.
- *Go easy on teaching manners at the table.* You have years to remedy behaviors like kids eating with their hands and blowing bubbles in their milk. But it's hard for kids to relax when they're constantly being corrected. And it's not so easy for parents to enjoy dinnertime if they have to be constantly vigilant about their children's manners. So focus on one priority at a time, and don't let the enforcement of minding manners take over the dinner. You can, though, focus on the manners that help build respectful speaking and listening, like not speaking with your mouth full, or not talking over anyone. Those are manners that we can all try to improve, so kids won't feel so singled out.

- *Set some guidelines for conversation, if necessary, such as “Only one person can speak at a time” or “We’re not going to interrupt each other.”* One large, talkative family has the rule that family members can talk only if they are holding a shell. When they are done speaking, the shell is passed to the next speaker.
- *Complaining about the food is one of the greatest sources of conflict at the table.* Nothing sours my mood more quickly than cooking a dinner that my sons don’t like. When they were young I circumvented this source of conflict by preparing a list of meals that everyone agreed to eat without bellyaching. From time to time I would update the list. Then I would know that they had signed off on any meal I was taking the time to prepare.
- *Using technology at the table is another growing source of family tension.* A 2012 survey found that there are two sets of standards at the dinner table.<sup>2</sup> Parents use technology at the table at twice the rate that their children are allowed. In other words, what’s good for the goose isn’t so good for the gosling. Perhaps a starting point would be for parents and kids to agree on the rules. The rules might well be a no-technology policy at the table, so that face-to-face conversation is consistently valued. Other families might agree to use technology lightly but only to share content with fellow diners, not to text with absent parties.
- *Managing “that’s not fair” complaints.* Where there are siblings there are almost always complaints about fairness. My sons, who are two and a half years apart, could be best friends one minute and outraged with each other the next, at a perceived inequity. When complaints, of “he got more” rang out, I would try to remind them that fairness is about getting what you need rather than getting the same amount as your brother. As my husband used to say over and over, “It’s not equal, but it’s fair.”

## PLAYING GAMES

Playing games at the table can bring variety to the conversation and can also be an effective way to extend your dinner hour. I favor playing games that don’t require any boards, dice, or screens because those items can add

complications, like spilling milk on an iPad or losing a game piece in a bowl of soup.

### **For children under age eight**

There are many word games that are fun to play at the table, and can then lead to interesting conversations even after the game is over.

**ROSE AND THORN** This is a game that really works for all ages, and it is one of our go-to games at The Family Dinner Project community dinners because it's so user-friendly. (It's also a game that, according to numerous media sources, the Obama family plays at their family dinners.) Each family member describes something positive (the rose of the day) and something negative or difficult (the thorn). I like the way this game puts everyone on the same level and gives a structured way to talk about what can feel amorphous. There are countless variations on this question if your family gets bored with this version. You can ask for the silliest and most serious thing that happened, the most surprising thing that happened, or what made you feel happy, impatient, grateful, annoyed, or some other attitude that might engage the members of your family.

**GUESS THAT EMOTION** This is a game that's fun for younger kids. It has the added bonus of helping kids identify feelings, which is a building block in developing the capacity for empathy.

As a family, you might first brainstorm several examples of feelings—like sad, angry, happy, surprised, worried, excited—and agree that the game will be based on this list. (This will cut down on family members wanting to use more obscure and hard-to-enact states, such as agitated or stunned). Have one person volunteer to leave the table for a minute. Once she leaves, the rest of the family decides on an emotion. When she returns, the rest of the family talks and eats with that feeling in mind but without naming the emotion. The family member who is in the dark has to guess what emotion is being enacted.

For example, if the emotion is “worried” someone might say, “I think you'll bite my head off if I get up to get another helping of soup,” and a



child might say, “I have so much homework to do tonight, I’m never going to get to sleep.” Or if the emotion is “happy,” a parent might say, “That soup was so delicious, I can’t wait to have some more,” and another family member might declare, “I am really enjoying the conversation we’re having tonight.” Each family member can take a turn leaving the room and guessing the emotion. You can play this game with older children as well and kick up the difficulty by allowing only body language or facial expression to convey the emotion.

**TWO TRUTHS AND A TALL TALE** This game is another one that we play at The Family Dinner Project community dinners, like the one we held in Lynn, Massachusetts, with six families, including children who ranged from toddlers to teens. I think it is intriguing to adults as well as kids.

Each person comes up with two factual statements about himself or his experiences and one that is a fiction. The three statements are presented to the family, and everyone has to guess which item has been made up. Of course, trying to disguise a false item is particularly challenging for family members who know each other very well, but keep in mind that the game can also be used to start a conversation about what happened during the day. For example: “For lunch I ate a piece of chocolate cake and a yogurt; I walked up nine flights to my office because the elevator was broken; and I learned something new today about yoga.”

**MINDFULNESS GAME** Ask all your diners to close their eyes and remain silent for about a minute while you ask them to focus on what they hear and what they smell. Children generally have more acute senses of hearing and smell than adults do, so don’t be surprised if the kids identify things that don’t register for the adults. For added fun, encourage everyone to imitate the sounds they hear or try to describe the smells. This game is enriched by playing it outside while picnicking so you’re privy to sounds other than the ticking of a clock or the whirring of a refrigerator motor.

**GUESS THE TITLE** This is a game I adapted from Jay Allison’s 60-second Shortlist spots on WCAI, the public radio station on Cape Cod and the Islands. A short list is made “from your experience or research or daily life.”

(In the radio version, the list is read out loud and then, after a pause, the listener hears what the list was all about.) If I were to be on the radio I might offer the following: sleeping late, sand in my sheets, no TV, outdoor shower, riding the waves, losing sunglasses, ice cream cones dipped in chocolate, no to-do lists. Then there would be a pause so the listener could conjure up the title of my list: “A beach vacation.”

For kids of all ages, this more pedestrian version of shortlists works well: Each person lists a bunch of items, tangible or not, and then the rest of the family has to guess what the intended title of the list might be. For example, an adult might list: loose change, a car key, tissues, lipstick, and a flashlight. The title turns out to be “contents of my pocketbook.” A child might compose a list of “foods I hate” or “countries I want to visit in my lifetime.”

When we’ve played this game at The Family Dinner Project community dinners, we’ve adapted it for preschool children. A parent might whisper a category to them—say, things in your bed or favorite things to do in the summer—and have them list the items out loud so that the others can guess the title.

**WOULD YOU RATHER** Here’s a game I learned from The Family Dinner Project team. Each family member takes a turn asking “Would you rather . . .” questions. Of course you can make up your own, but to get you started, here are a few from our team. *Would you rather . . .*

- \_\_\_ be able to fly or be invisible?
- \_\_\_ speak every language in the world or play every instrument?
- \_\_\_ live in the future or the past?
- \_\_\_ live without a phone or without a TV?
- \_\_\_ lose your sense of taste or your sense of smell?
- \_\_\_ go to the beach in the summer or skiing in the winter?
- \_\_\_ meet the president of the United States or your favorite movie star?
- \_\_\_ live in the city or the country?
- \_\_\_ have to eat a bowl of crickets or a bowl of worms?
- \_\_\_ always have the same song stuck in your head or always have the same dream at night?

— always have to enter the room backward or always have to somersault out?

### **For children eight and older**

Kids who are old enough to recognize more of the foods you serve and whose verbal skills are better developed than their younger peers may enjoy the following games.

**FRUIT AND VEGETABLE GAME** I can play the fruit and vegetable game by the hour (and have). One family member (the “leader” of a round) thinks of a person known by everyone else at the table. Then others around the table ask the leader metaphorical questions to try guess this person. For example, “If this person were a vegetable, what vegetable would he or she be?” or “If he or she were a fruit, or a dessert, which would he or she be?” You can branch out to nonfood categories, such as “What color, animal, or type of weather would this person be?” The idea is to stick to figurative rather than literal thinking. In other words, the leader will answer in terms of how the individual’s personality might be manifested in another form rather than answering in terms of the person’s actual favorite vegetable to eat or color that they like to wear. Once the leader shares at least a few category examples, everyone else tries to guess the person who is being described metaphorically. The player who guesses correctly gets to think up the next person.

In therapy, I’ve often played this with siblings and had them come up with descriptors for their parents. It’s especially interesting to them, and to me, when the images are very similar (for example, “My mother is like an orange or a peach”) and when the images clash (as in “My mother is like a lemon.” “No, she’s more like a watermelon!”) These similarities or differences can springboard a discussion about each one’s perceptions of a person who, although known by all, is perhaps experienced in different ways.

**HIGGLETY-PIGGLETY** One person thinks of two rhyming words, such as “crazy daisy,” but doesn’t tell the group what he is thinking. Instead, he gives a synonym, such as “insane flower.” He also lets everyone know how

many syllables are in the words they're guessing by using the phrase "higglety-pigglety" (three-syllable words), or "higgy-piggy" (two-syllable words), or "hig-pig" (one-syllable words). "Crazy daisy" is a higgy-piggy, whereas "history mystery" is a "higglety-pigglety." (Naturally, for the purpose of this game, chosen words should contain no more than three syllables.) Everyone guesses, and whoever gets it first gets to think of the next one.

**HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW ME?** Another game I've played with much hilarity with young teen boys (not the easiest group to involve in a table game) and with three generations of my family is the "How well do you know me?" game. You pass out slips of blank paper to each person at the table and ask them to answer three questions. The leader comes up with the questions, which are infinite in possibility, and preferably a bit whimsical. Some examples are: "If your house was burning, what is one item you would grab?," "If you could have dinner with a celebrity, who would that be?," and "If you could be a character in a book, what character would you be?"

Once each participant has written down three responses, the leader of the game collects all the slips of paper. She then reads aloud each person's response to the first question while everyone tries to guess which answer corresponds with which person. As an example, with five players, let's say you're reading all the answers to the prompt "What tattoo would you put on your neck?" The answers are: a bluebird, a heart, my birth date, a skull, and a mathematical equation. After each person guesses which response goes with which player, a correct guess scores a point. But, honestly, the game is entertaining enough that you don't even need to keep score—unless you're playing this with young teen boys and then maybe you do!

**FOOD WORD GAME** When my kids were in elementary school, one son was given the assignment to come up with as many words as he could that related to birds. I hope it wasn't cheating when we all spent hours that night at the dinner table free-associating to bird words and bird-related words. We came up with hundreds. My husband is a lifelong birder, so he's as obsessed with winged creatures as I am with food.

It got me thinking: What if we played the same game with food words? How many words or expressions can you come up with that contain the word salt? (For starters—salt in the wound, salty dog, salt-and-pepper beard.) Or bread? (Bread and butter, man cannot live by bread alone.) Or fish? (Neither fish nor fowl, fishing for compliments, fish or cut bait.) You can go around the table with each person coming up with a word or phrase until you run out of options. The last person able to come up with a word scores a point.

**MUSIC LYRIC GAMES** One family who had turned to The Family Dinner Project for help because their three teenagers were eating fast-food dinners in their bedrooms ended up teaching us a table game they made up. This game spontaneously emerged once the family started eating together (and enjoying healthy food). One parent would bring up an item from the news, and the kids would create rap lyrics that connected to the news item; the parents would come up with an old pop song lyric that also applied.

Another game is Name That Tune. Hum a few bars of a popular tune and see who can guess the tune first. You can use ad jingles, holiday songs, popular songs from the radio, family favorites sung on car rides, or any other song that everyone will know.

**CONVERSATION STARTERS IN A JAR** This game is good for all ages. Cut up dozens of little strips of paper. On each one, write a “conversation starter.” There are tons of examples offered on The Family Dinner Project website ([thefamilydinnerproject.org](http://thefamilydinnerproject.org)), but here is a sampling:

“What are two things you feel grateful for today?”

“Who is your best friend?”

“If you are feeling sick or sad, what can someone do to care for you?”

“What is your favorite story about our family?”

“What is your favorite character in a book or movie? Why?”

“Do you know how your name was chosen?”

“If you had three wishes, what would they be?”

“What is your favorite thing to do outside?”

“Do you prefer to speak or to listen?”

“What is your best personality trait?”

“Where do you feel most relaxed?”

“If you could be one age for the rest of your life, what age would it be?  
Why?”

Then stuff these slips of paper into a jar or tissue box. When conversation lags, suggest that someone pull out a slip and answer the question. Other family members can answer the same question or pull out another one.

### TALKING ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTER

How is talk supported at your table? If the conversation allows for free expression of feeling, tolerates differences of opinion, and enables everyone to feel listened to, then it *is* conversation that matters. Anything more is gravy. But since gravy enhances the flavor, let's talk about that. The gravy is talk about what's important to you as a family, and as individuals. It's also conversation about moral dilemmas that test how you want to live your lives.<sup>3</sup> With my children, some of the best conversations we've had were prompted by ethical dilemmas that my husband or I faced in the course of an ordinary day. I remember my husband telling our sons, then early adolescents, that he had caught a student cheating on a test. He knew that by turning him in the student would likely lose his scholarship and have to drop out. What should he do? (He ended up giving him an F on the test and a very stern lecture that was meant to scare some sense into the young man.)

Another approach taken by Amy Chua, Yale law professor and author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, is to pose hypothetical moral challenges to her children: “If one of us committed a crime, would you turn us in?”<sup>4</sup> Historical events that your kids are studying can also be good fodder for conversation. “What do you think we could have done as a family if we wanted to protect a Jewish friend during Hitler's rise to power?” Obviously, neither of these conversational prompts makes for light chitchat, nor would they be suitable for children who are younger than about twelve.

If you’re looking for a continual source of interesting conversation, look no further than daily media content. For example, elections can prompt discussions about how democracy works and what it means when people have to wait for hours to vote. Scandals can provide fodder for talk about truth telling. News about an abusive coach can prompt conversation about what inspires players to play better and what behavior is off-limits.

On The Family Dinner Project’s website, the “Conversation of the Week” offers excellent examples of items in the news that can provide the springboard for lively conversations at the table.

If you want to provoke conversations about ethics, you can tie those to events on the calendar. For example, on Thanksgiving talk about what kind of giving family you are or want to be, or to what groups your ancestors have given money or time. If you were to volunteer as a family, what kind of organization would you choose to help out with—one that provides medical care, food, scholarships, clothing, or human rights? Do you want to give time or money to a small or a large organization? One that is local, national, or international? One that benefits children, families, or animals?

Memorial Day, the last Monday of May, is the holiday commemorating the men and women who have died while serving in the U.S. armed forces. As well as marking the unofficial start of summer, the occasion can also be an opportunity to talk about what causes or circumstances warrant a call to war. It can prompt questions about what kind of resistance responses are warranted if our country participates in a war that you think is morally questionable.

Labor Day, another Monday holiday, celebrates the rights of American workers. It could be the chance to ask about what rights you think workers should have and which ones are most important to you.

In my roundup of different sources of dinner conversation—from news items to questions about what happened at school, from word games to guessing games, from questions about holidays to ones about historical events—I’ve left the most obvious conversation prompt for last. The food! Conversation about the food comprises an estimated 20 to 30 percent of mealtime talk.<sup>5</sup> For example, “Please pass the pepper” or “This pasta is

overcooked.” It is not always obvious how to stretch these kinds of remarks into full-fledged conversations. But you can ask your kids to imagine what could improve the taste of the dinner, or ask them to brainstorm other meals that could use the same ingredients. You can also ask them to think of all the people who were involved in getting a particular food to this dinner, starting with the farmer and progressing to the truck driver, the shelf stocker at the grocery store, the checkout person, and Dad, who cooked the potatoes. And, as a last conversation topic, there’s always “What shall we have for dinner tomorrow night?”