



ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Nurture and Challenge Academically Capable Students

From the Office of the Head of School, Dr. Christopher A. Schoberl

Is it Monday, Yet? is my once monthly attempt to address developmental and topical issues we confront as we “challenge and nurture” our children. The topics I cover will be drawn from developmental and cognitive psychology, current research, and my own parenting and school administrator experience, and could just as easily be a response to local, national, or world events that have parenting implications. Keep your eyes on this spot in the final Compass of each month, and if you have any great ideas about future topics, please shoot me an email or text me... or, better yet, kick it old school and give me a call.

Is it Monday, Yet? 9/24



“I don’t really know how to tell you this, sweetheart, so I’m just going to come right out and say it: Your goldfish ran away.”

How to Talk with your Child about Difficult Topics

When Eileen and I decided to get married and start a family, I had two moments of panic. You see, I really need a good night’s sleep, and I was convinced that if I were deprived of sleep because of a crying child, I’d become Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. Once I realized that I could get by on a lot less sleep than I thought I needed, I panicked when I thought about all of the tough conversations I’d have to have with my children, and whether or not I was up to the task.

Part of the problem was that I did not have any models for what these might look like from a child’s perspective: for the life of me, I cannot recall a single conversation about drugs, bullying, peer pressure, friendship... and definitely not sex... invited by my parents. I was raised in a generation when parents

expected the school to address these topics or trusted that we'd figure it out on our own. We had no doubt that we'd feel the consequences if we crossed the line in any of these cases, but we were unsure where that line was, but now that I think about it, this may have been an intentional parenting strategy, rather than benign neglect (though I have my doubts).

Between what I picked up in Health class and what I figured out on my own, Eileen and I did manage to start a wonderful family. When Molly, Zach, and Ethan were very young, between the ages of 8 and 10, and we were living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, we used to like go for Sunday walks, stopping by a few playgrounds, grabbing bagels and coffee and OJ, and settling on the steps of Columbia's Lowe Library, where the kids could run freely with the children of other families who had the same idea. One Sunday while we were watching the kids thus engaged, Eileen turned to me, between sips of coffee, and said, "I think you need to talk with Zach about the birds and the bees, and now's the perfect time."

Before I could cough up the lox I had aspirated, my mind flashed back to those several times I faked being asleep when the baby was crying, and I knew there was little chance I was wiggling out of this, but I gave it a shot, anyway. "Hun," I said, "This is sort of sudden... I'm really not prepared" (I imagined needing at least a PowerPoint and some chart paper... and maybe different colored Post-Its). "Man up," she said. "Think of all those times you faked being asleep when one of them was crying in the middle of the night! Take him on a walk and just casually ease into it." I thought, "Casually?" "Ease?" These were not two words that came to mind when I imagined this particular conversation.

In the end, I managed to do a pretty good job, even if I do say so myself, and even polished my act a bit further (no PowerPoints or Post-Its though) when it was Ethan's turn (Eileen broke the news to Molly, to which she replied, "Gross: you and Poppy did that three times!?").

No matter what the issue, and today's kids have many more to deal with than my own children only 10 years ago, and their children will have many others, I found the following advice as timeless as it was helpful, and I hope you feel the same way:

1. Rather than simply launching into a discussion about the topic itself or offering advice in lecture format or by asking too many questions that might seem like an interrogation, start by asking one simple question, such as, "Does _____ seem to be an issue at Ashbrook?" or "Is _____ something you hear kids talking about at school?" This takes the pressure off your child and gives them a chance to talk about a topic they may be struggling with, in a non-threatening way. And follow your child's lead: just because you planned on talking about _____, and wanted to cross it off your "to-do" list, you may only open the door a crack during an initial conversation, and that's OK: circle back at a later date.
2. Don't feel the need to fill empty space. Embrace the power of wait time as a way to let your child know you are listening to understand (rather than to respond), and that you are interested in what they have to say. Don't be afraid to offer personal experiences, which convey a sense of vulnerability and trust, and might be instrumental in easing your child into what feels like a safer conversation.

3. Try to time the conversation to coincide with something you are working on together (with your hands) and something that takes the focus off your child and does not require them to make eye contact with you, which can feel very intimidating, embarrassing, or even judgmental. Talking while preparing a meal, baking, doing yard work, repairing a flat tire on a bicycle, etc. have all been strategies of mine, and they really opened up the discussion.
4. Make sure that you also make it a point to be clear with your expectations and your family values. Your child needs to know that you do not condone certain behaviors. This is a nuanced dance: how do you draw the line but also allow for the fact that your child may make a bad decision, a mistake, or cross the line, while ALSO encouraging honesty and inviting them to reach out if they do stumble, or need help? Every family does this in its own way, but be sure to communicate expectations.
5. Help your child realize that you, as parents, have their best interests at heart, but that you are not the only adults in their lives they could go to for help. Make sure they understand that other relatives, their teachers, coaches, faith leaders, and parents of their friends, are all people who care about them and people they can reach out to for help. In fact, depending upon your relationship with these other adults, Eileen and I would always know which adults our kids were talking with, and would often enlist their help prior to and following tough discussions at home, and we would do the same for their children.
6. Let your children know that they do not need to be more eloquent, when asking for help, than, "I need help." Many children will not know how to enter into these discussions (many people will blame social media and the negative impact its overuse has had on training children in essential interpersonal skills: while I cannot argue that this is not a factor, blaming it all on Tik Tok is an oversimplification). Children may have a sense that they need help or are curious about something, but may not be sure how to articulate specifics. Help them to understand that they don't need to have it all figured out when they come to you, but that simply asking for help will open the door to a supportive conversation.
7. Practice hearing a request for help or surprising news from your child (you may not always be the one to initiate the conversation). I cannot tell you how many times I have practiced speaking to prepare for a presentation, but until I had kids of my own, I never practiced listening. Play this game with your partner, once the kids are asleep. Sit across from each other and utter five sentences each, simulating what your child might come to you with at some point in the future. No need to respond or role play, though there is no downside to that. Just listen, and ask yourself, what does your body language or silence convey? What is one all-purpose response you can utter (no matter the issue) that would a) buy you the few seconds you need to offer a thoughtful response, b) honor your child's courage, and c) invite conversation?: if you practice saying anything, practice your "all-purpose" response.
8. Maybe most importantly, remember to be fully present and to listen (indeed, you will be providing a great model for what this looks like, too), and if you need a mnemonic device to

know the best way to do this, recall that “listen” is an anagram for “silent.” Or, as my grandmother used to tell us, you have two ears and one mouth: listen and speak proportionately. Says Dr. Michael Nichols, author of *The Lost Art of Listening*, “good listening is how we convey our empathy. It lets children know that their thoughts and feelings matter, and that they are understandable and acceptable as people.”

9. Keep in mind that although they may seem as though they are not listening, or that they are annoyed that you are bringing _____ up, in terms of the long game, you are the most influential person in your child’s life. That said, there is an earlier window, during the younger years, before you start competing with peers, that you’ll want to remain mindful of. By a median age of 12 years, you’ll want to work hard to “get into their heads” to establish your family values, hopefully before they start hearing from many other sources that may not always have their best interests at heart.
10. Finally, if your child talks to you about something that is bothering them, resist the temptation to jump in and fix the situation. Allow them a chance to “sit with the issue” (the exception, of course, is if they share something with you that endangers themselves or others) for 24 hours, and circle back after that. If the issue is still bothering them, pick up the phone and call his or her teacher, Mrs. Sechler, or me, and give us a chance to help (this is “the 24 hour rule”). Most often, issues that seemed overwhelming or super important to your child one day, will evaporate in a day’s time, and if you rush in to save the day, you may take away a chance for your child to practice coping skills, convince them that you do not trust their abilities to handle things, or get accused of butting in!

Whether it’s drug use, social media use, mental health, bullying, academic struggles, peer pressure, juuling/vaping/smoking... or sex... if you are not already thinking about how you will enter into these discussions, you will be, sooner than you think, and as uncomfortable as it was for me at the time, I’m going to give this advice (yes, a clear example of “do as I say, not as I did”): ENJOY THE MOMENT. In hindsight, I was so worried about not having models in my own life to draw from, or that Molly, Zach, and Ethan would not listen to me, that I failed to recognize these times as watershed points on an ever accelerating timeline; I have very few regrets in my life, but not taking the time to enjoy these moments, is one of them!

Be Well, Doc

PS: Here are some good resources for information about how to have productive conversations with your children:

