

Communication Tip No. 7: Ask Open-Ended Questions

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It's yet another family get-together, and I am once again trying to connect with a younger family member. "How's school?" I ask. "Fine." she answers. "I heard you went on vacation. Did you have a good time?" I question. "Yup." another relative responds.

These sorts of conversations aren't exactly relationship strengthening. While part of that may be because a young person doesn't feel like sharing, a lot of it has to do with the fact that I was asking close-ended questions. That is, I was asking a question that only really required a one-word response.



It seems simple, but one of the best ways to open up communication between ourselves and the kids we care for is to ask open-ended questions.

To practice this communication tool, we must consider

Who: We can ask open-ended questions of anyone, but they are particularly effective with young people to build strong relationships between you and a child.

What: Open-ended questions give the responder a chance to share an expansive answer. These kinds of questions require a young person to think, reflect and give a fuller response to communicate their thoughts and feelings.

- How did your first day at school go?
- What did you think of the library book you read?
- What happened at the party after I left?
- Why didn't you have a good day today?

Where and When: Ask youth open-ended questions in a space and at a time when you have the capacity to listen to their answers. It is not effective, for example, to ask a question and just as a child starts to share, you pull away to check your email or turn to talk to someone else. To truly engage children, you must not only ask for their time and attention, you must give yours.

How: Some general characteristics of open-ended questions to consider:

- Ask when you are hoping to hear more details about a situation.
- A series of open-ended questions encourage a child to more fully express him or herself.
- Open-ended questions are most effective when they are narrowed slightly to center around a particular topic. For example, rather than "How was your day?" You might ask, "How was that test you were telling me about?"
- Require good conversation skills, such as asking follow-up questions, asking for clarification and repeating back what you heard to be sure you understood.