

# 5 TIPS TO ENGAGE CHILDREN IN MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

HOW TO KEEP THE DIALOGUE GOING.

**A**dult conversations with children tend to go along the lines of giving instructions (e.g., "Eat your dinner", "Put away your toys") or baby talk (e.g., "Do you want to mum-mum?"). But meaningful conversations do much more. In the early years, children are learning to put words together to build vocabulary, form phrases and sentences, and figure out speech patterns. Participating in back-and-forth exchanges is how they develop language and communication skills. Meaningful conversations help children learn about the world around them, process information, build trust and strengthen family bonds.

## 1 SPEAK AT THEIR LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING

While it may not be possible to have a dialogue with babies, you can engage them by making eye contact and smiling, narrate what you are doing, and describe their gestures and actions (e.g., "Oh, you are showing me that you are excited by moving your arms and legs"). Use repetition to help them associate certain words with actions or objects.

With toddlers, speak slowly, use short sentences, and expand on what they say. For example, if he says "cat" when he sees one, you might add descriptive words such as "That is a big orange cat".

Preschoolers have a wider vocabulary but may not be able to process large chunks of information. Break it down into short, simple sentences (e.g., "We are going to the park. It's hot today. Let's put on your hat").



## 2 CHOOSE THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE

Some situations lend themselves naturally to starting a conversation, such as preschool pick-ups, at the dinner table or bedtime storytelling. Gauge children's mood and energy levels, and save deeper conversations for another time if they are tired or hungry.

## 3 ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Effective conversation-starters tend to be open-ended. Asking "What was your favourite part of preschool today?" rather than "Did you have fun in preschool today?" is a better way to engage children. Questions that start with "how" and "why" also work well as they invite more than one-word answers. Such questions encourage children to remember, explain, reason and evaluate, which enrich their thinking and language.



## 4 REMOVE DISTRACTIONS

Put aside your phone or tablet, close your laptop and turn off the TV. Giving children your full attention demonstrates respect and shows that what they have to say is important to you. Maintaining eye contact and lowering yourself to their eye level also make them feel more connected to you.



## 5 CONNECT AND INVOLVE YOURSELF

Children love stories. Share your past experiences of school and friends, or how you dealt with current challenges or even funny moments. This encourages them to open up about their own experiences and concerns. Follow their lead and demonstrate interest by saying things like "Tell me more", "Wow!" or "Go on ...". Encouraging smiles and affirming nods indicate active listening.

Conversations are a two-way street. Give children time to form and articulate their response. Let them finish what they have to say before asking questions. Resist the urge to interrupt, jump to conclusions or judge.