



Engaging in Good Conversation

Conversations are the foundation of strong relationships, and strong relationships are the goal of meaningful mentoring. Engaging in the art of conversation does not always come naturally to people, and for many adolescents it can be a territory in which they have yet to build skills. (Ever have this conversation with a teen? “How are you doing?” “Fine.” “How’s school?” “Fine.”)

Below are some tips for making conversations work, as well as some conversation starters to spark interesting discussions. Hopefully, they not only give you and your mentee something else to chat about once in a while, but also give you a chance to get to know each other a little better.

Tips for Making Conversations Work

- **Keep it going.** It’s one thing to ask a question and then sit back to wait for an answer. It is another thing to really engage in a conversation. Asking follow-up questions or providing open-ended responses are great ways to keep the conversation going. The idea is not to debate an answer but to learn more. Try some of these:

 - “That’s cool. Tell me more.”
 - “You’ve really thought about this, haven’t you?”
 - “Are you saying . . . ?”
 - “Interesting. Have you thought about . . . ?”
- **Conversation doesn’t have to be “heavy.”** It is important to have conversations about subjects that matter deeply, such as who are the most influential people in a young person’s life. It is also important to listen to why a young person likes a certain fad, music star, or TV program. All conversations are meaningful when two people are truly engaged and interested in one another’s questions and answers.
- **Be prepared for the unexpected answer.** You may ask a question and get an answer you did not want or expect. If an answer bothers you, simply listen and ask more questions about why the young person thinks and feels that way. Suspend your own judgment and let young people express their ideas and opinions.
- **Listening is most important.** Conversations with kids are better when we “elders” practice the art of listening. Through careful listening we tell them we care about their thoughts—and we care about them.
- **Timing can be everything.** If you ask a question that is met with silence or “the look,” maybe this isn’t the best time for a conversation. Or it could be that the specific question triggers a bigger issue for him, or he needs some time to process it. Taking a rain check on a question is okay.
- **Be prepared to give your own answer.** You are focusing on the young person, but she may also want to turn the question in your direction. This is a great chance to model thoughtful, honest responses.