



Creating Open Dialogue

As children stretch their character development muscles, adults can engage with them, not as a superior, but as someone curious about the situation, encouraging the child to work the issues through as independently as possible. Using “what’s the deal?”™ stories as the catalyst, children can share their ethical dilemmas, their decision rationale and their evolving competence – while discussing Fiona and Luke’s sticky situations.

Keeping the conversation open, engaging and safe requires a more facilitative approach than you may be accustomed to. Like the butterfly needs to build its wing muscles before flying free, so, too, do children need to exercise their character muscles. Giving answers or showing disappointment will guarantee less openness the next time you try to engage.

Here are a few hints for keeping them coming back for more:

- **Don’t get personal.** Initially it will be easier for children to talk about the issues as they relate to others (Fiona and Luke). Shifting the focus to the child re-introduces the adult/ child dynamic – and they will likely give the answers they think you want to hear – or will find a reason to end the conversation early.
- **Keep it as light as possible.** Although what you are discussing may not be funny, it can be discussed comfortably and easily. If things get tense, consider changing the subject for a minute. Children should look forward to these discussions; driving too hard can jeopardize this process and the opportunities it brings.
- **Share a personal story.** These are great opportunities for children to get to know you a little. If you can keep it short – 4 or 5 sentences - they can get right back to the character exercise. If they are curious and ask to hear more about your anecdote – go for it. How wonderful to have a child asking about your childhood!
- **Listen. Find ways to gently ask questions.** Seek to understand – not to corner them. This should not feel like an inquisition or that there is a wrong answer.
- **Trust.** If you find yourself worrying about their approach or choices, give them room and time to discuss their logic and motivation. For example – if they choose to lie for a friend, you might want to remember how often we, as adults, look the other way.
- **Do not betray a trust.** If the child shares a story using names, use every bit of restraint you have to NOT use that information with other adults. Imagine how friends or schoolmates would respond if your child’s disclosure was ever exposed.
- **Test their willingness to get personal** – late in the discussion. “Has anything like this really happened at school? Or to you?” If they choose to open up – continue to give them quiet room to explore a topic, even though you may be tempted to sit a little closer and engage a little deeper. They should still feel in control of the level of intimacy.