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Bill Cirone op ed column

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Helping children relate

By Bill Cirone, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

From coast to coast and around the globe, one of the most common questions parents ask children is, “What did you do at school today?” A very common frustration we hear voiced by parents is that their children invariably respond with “Nothing,” or “I don’t know,” or “I don’t remember.”

It’s hard to deal with because parents truly want to know the answer. They are very much interested in what goes on inside and outside the classroom — what their children are learning and what kinds of interactions they are having with other students.

Through the years, parents have gotten creative. Some give their children time to relax and “decompress” after school before asking questions, hoping that the space will provide the respite needed to prime the pump.

Others have changed that initial question to one that seems more promising to start the conversation. They ask open-ended things like, “How was your day?” or “Who made you laugh today?” or “What games did you play at recess?” Other variations include, “What was the best thing that happened today,” or its converse, “What was the hardest thing that happened today?” These questions are met with varying degrees of success.

Sara Ackerman, a parent and teacher, recently wrote an article in the *Washington Post* about a technique that finally worked with her own young daughter. She flipped the script and asked, “Do you want to hear about my day?”

Her daughter said yes and Ackerman then launched into a tale of meetings and photocopying, jammed printers, lost keys, and funny comments from colleagues.

It worked. Her daughter then took her turn telling her about the day that just ended.

Said Ackerman, “I think my daughter is most interested in unveiling the mystery of what I do when I’m not with her.

“It doesn’t matter whether you’re a software developer, a cashier, a blogger, a doctor, a bus driver, or a stay-at-home parent, because it’s not about the minutiae of the work,” she said. “It’s about sharing what makes us laugh and what bores us, the mistakes we make and what is hard for us, the interesting people we meet.”

Parents sometimes forget that the skill involved in relating an experience is not simple or innate. Children need to learn how to do it. The best way for them to learn is to see how others do it and then imitate the behavior. Parents can be the best models of all for this purpose.

As Ackerman acknowledged, work is often the last thing parents want to talk about when they get home. They think that a listing of the day’s details would bore anyone with a pulse, especially a young person. Maybe the child feels the same way. That’s why the game of sharing can be so effective.

Every child is different and each needs a different approach, so this technique is certainly not for everyone. But it’s worth a try in households where young children seem reluctant or unable to relate the details of their day. Sharing and modeling are easy ways for parents to help children learn how to relate, and it’s a skill that could prove useful over a lifetime.

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