

CONVERSATION STARTER 1: “You’re Really Good at This!”

Finding the Moment

Catch a young person doing well, and then say something about it! It could be anything from spelling to soccer to singing. It could be happening in a formal setting like a class or a game, during a practice, or during a quiet moment in the car or on the bus after an event. All that matters is that the thriving conversation is started right away, when the “doing well” is fresh.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- You really seem to be a natural at this.
- Have you ever thought about how this talent could be something you get paid for later in life?
- Is this really fun for you?
- Have you always been good at this or did you have to learn it first?
- What do you like about it?
- Do you have any goals around this? Anything I can do to help?
- I love seeing you doing well and enjoying it.

Follow-through

No matter what the talent or skill, there are places to go with it. Good spellers can compete in spelling bees, help check her friends’ English papers, or consider becoming an editor as a job. A good soccer player can not only continue to play on better teams, and improve his own skills, but also become a coach for younger players or perhaps get a scholarship for college. Be creative and help your young person open up to the myriad possibilities.

CONVERSATION STARTER 2: “This Seems to Make You Happy”

Finding the Moment

The key to finding this is to notice—notice when a young person is having a flow experience...not just the momentary happiness of an ice cream sundae, but the sustained “time doesn’t exist” thrill of spending two hours in front of the computer editing video footage and then proudly showing others the resulting 5-minute clip. Or the hours spent curled up in a comfortable chair to plow through the fourth Harry Potter novel in one sitting. Or it might be that a child who has been bored through the first five days of a vacation suddenly lights up when you stop by the roadside to say hello to a group of beautiful horses.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- What does it feel like when you’re doing this activity?
- How did you become so motivated?
- Do any of your friends like doing this, too?
- Let’s figure out a way for you to do more of this!
- Would you teach me a little about it so I can share in the fun or understand you better?
- What are the things you like about it?
- How does a person move to the next level?
- Is there anything else that makes you feel this way?

Follow-through

Noticing their enjoyment can affirm for a young person that this talent, skill, or spark is something special about her or him. A great way to follow through is to check back about the activity in a few days or a week by subtly suggesting there’s a next step: What’s your next film project going to be? Have you found any other books you like as much as the Harry Potters?

CONVERSATION STARTER 3: “Have You Ever Thought of...?”

Finding the Moment

This is a question for a quiet time, while you’re traveling, sitting on a bench at the park, taking a break from a bike ride, or laying on a hillside waiting for Fourth of July fireworks to start. It might also work well right after you hear the young person heave a sigh of boredom.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- What’s the coolest job you’ve ever heard of?
- I know someone who spends every workday taking care of elephants at an elephant sanctuary!
- Do you ever wish you were an inventor? An undersea diver? A scientist making a medical breakthrough?
- What would it be like to learn the folk dances of Sweden or the folk songs of Bali?
- Have you ever heard of people having a life list? [*explain about it being a list of really interesting goals and things to do during one’s life, then tell one from yours, like “join a tornado chase team” or “explore a real castle” or “record a song I’ve written”.*]

Follow-through

Make an agreement to take some steps toward meeting some life-list goals! Google the term “life list” and visit some of the sites that come up to see if you like the ideas there.

CONVERSATION STARTER 4: “I Had a Really Great Day Today; Let Me Tell You Why!”

Finding the Moment

Blow your kids’ minds one day by bursting through the back door and, instead of immediately asking them about homework or complaining about the traffic, say exuberantly, “I had such a great day today!” Then, whether they ask about it or not, tell them what was so great about it. Let your enthusiasm spill into your tone of voice and your gestures; jump up and down, if that’s your style. And set the stage for a confidential talk to begin.

Questions, Probes, and Ideas

- When’s the last time you had a day like that?
- What were you doing? What was so great about it?
- [*If it has been awhile*] What could we do to make tomorrow or the next day a day like that for you?
- What would you want to do? How would you spend your time?
- What would you have accomplished at the end of the day?
- I don’t always have days like this, but I love it when I do—and it happens more often when I do what I love. What do you love to do?
- One thing that always improves my days is doing something to help other people; did you help someone today?

Follow-through

Encourage your young person to make some plans for a really great day; offer to help on some parts of it, but be sure to leave room for his or her initiative, too. Consider planning a little surprise for the young person—a bit of extra time together, an unexpected early-breakfast date on a school day, a “new” used book or CD from the thrift store. Help him or her see that the more you visualize and plan for having great days, the more often they happen!

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