

After-school questions: Parents, watch your language

Author and noted anti-bullying educator Rachel Simmons recently posted a fantastic essay on her website (rachelsimmons.com) that cautions against scavenging for signs of distress when we greet our kids at the end of the school day.

"Eyeing them in the rearview mirror, or as they drop their book bags by the door," she writes, "we scan their faces for the answer to one question: 'Were you happy today?'"

It's a valid thing to keep tabs on — our own children's happiness. But we can unwittingly sap their resilience by placing too much weight on their garden-variety struggles, which Simmons calls "social bumps in the road."

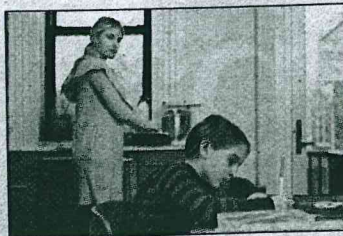
"The language we use with children as they face adversity has the power to influence emerging coping skills," Simmons writes.

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It can turn them into optimists or pessimists. It can inspire them to forge ahead or give them permission to throw in the towel. Just as toddlers learning to walk check their parents' responses when they fall, Simmons contends, older kids look to their parents for cues on how upset to be about their daily struggles.

"Interviewing for pain is a well-intentioned strategy to get a child to open up," Simmons writes. "It should not, however, be mistaken for empathy; it is one thing to feel your child's pain, another to create it out of whole



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cloth. Asking kids about what went wrong can offer parents a seductive but false sense of control: If you elicit news of a wound, perhaps you can heal it."

It's also a legitimate way to make sure nothing is seriously amiss with your child. No parent wants to miss warning signs of a truly troubled kid. And end-of-the-school-day information is notoriously hard to glean.

(How was your day? "Fine." What did you do at recess? "I

don't remember." Who hung out with you at lunch? "Friends.")

The trick isn't to stop asking questions, but to be mindful about the manner in which we ask.

A child psychologist once told me parents should wait 30 minutes — let kids decompress, blow off steam, process their day, plan their evening, just as adults often need to do after work — before asking them about their day.

My daughter talks most openly about her day at bedtime. It often means she's 20 to 30 minutes later falling asleep than I'd like, but I figure it's a worthy trade-off. I've also found she responds best to direct questions that are only indirectly about her.

"If you could trade spots for one day with anyone in your class, who would it be?" tells me whom she admires.

"Did you guys pick teams today

in gym?" starts a chat about outcasts and whether she ever feels — or treats someone — like one.

"What will you tell Will is the best part of third grade?" (Will is her younger brother. She relishes any opportunity to remind him she got someplace first.) "How about the worst part?"

Which are all, essentially, variations on "Were you happy today?" But with longer — and usually more revealing — answers.

— Heidi Stevens,
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