Open-ended Questions and Conversation Fuel

To build relationships with others, including children, dialog is essential. It must truly be a 2-way conversation where each is responding to the other in meaningful ways that is an expression of true interest. Any attempt here to give helpful conversation starters or extenders are NOT an attempt to manipulate a relationship. Rather let these serve as examples of ways to open the process of communication.

For some, these examples will seem unnecessary because you either have good experience in communication, or it is a natural strength. On the other hand, others may find these to be a lifeline to begin to build bridges between you and another person.

Remember, the concept of open-ended questions includes:

1. They are not able to be answered with a few words.
2. They seek more than facts.
3. They seek the intangibles of thoughts, feelings, hopes, or dreams.
4. They are about the other person in the conversation, not about you.
5. There are no right or wrong answers. They may be revealing, or not.
6. They give an opportunity to accept the person regardless their response to the question.
7. It's no about the question, it's about the building of a bridge.

For pre-school ages:

- Tell me about your drawing.
- You are crying. Tell me about your feelings.
- What did you think would happen?
- What's going to happen now?
- How does your doll feel about this situation?
- How can this be better?
- What would you do if you could do magic (or if you had power)?
- Who is your favorite friend? Why? Should other people be like him/her?
- What was your favorite part about today? (or about our trip, a movie, a story)
- Why do you think they did that?
- How would you feel if _____(name a situation)?

For elementary ages: (who are growing in competence)

- What is a task in our family you want to become yours?
- What would be a cool thing to be able to do?
- What do you like about your favorite friend/teacher/toy?
- Tell me about a favorite memory with _____.
- You seem upset. Tell me about what's going on.
- What can be done to make things better?
- What surprised you in the story?
- I want to understand what you are feeling. Can you describe it to me?
- What is the most important thing you want to do today?
- Why is that your favorite?
- Wouldn't it be cool if _____? (Ask the child to think of things that are really not possible.)
- I know you want XYZ. Can you tell me why that is important to you?

Pre-teens: (who are discovering they have feelings)

- Who is someone you look up to? Tell me about them.
- What do you wish was true about you?
- What do you wish was true about me (or another family member)?
- Tell me about something you daydream about.
- How do you feel about what happened today? What would you wish you could change about it?
- Who makes you feel best about yourself? What does he/she do?
- Where do feelings come from?
- What about the world is most confusing (or frustrating) to you?
- Describe what the most amazing person would be like.
- If you could buy a gift for a family member, who would it be and what would you get?
- If you could change your school, what would the improved school be like?

Teens: (who want to be taken seriously)

- What do you think caused him/her to do that?
- What would you do if you were in that situation?
- Tell me something interesting about your friend?
- What needs to be changed in the world?
- Where is one of the most interesting places you know about in the world?
- Do you think people are good for animals?
- What kind of animal would you own if it were possible?
- Tell me about one of your favorite songs? What is it about? What do you like about it?
- Who do you think is a great role model? What do you respect about him/her?
- What would be your dream job while you are young? When you get older?
- What would be a cool vacation?
- Tell me about something that scares you.
- How do you calm yourself down when you need to?
- Tell me about a time when you were proud of yourself.
- Tell of a time when you were proud of someone else in our family.
- What makes people bored? It that true for you?
- What is the most important quality in a teacher? Why?
- What is the most important thing you have learned that is not taught in schools? Why do you think that is?
- Do you think social media helps make/maintain friendships? Why/why not?
- What is something that bugs you in your school/church/neighborhood? What can you do about it?
- What is a favorite memory you have with a friend?
- What is the most challenging part of your life right now?
- What YouTube videos or shows would you recommend I watch?
- What is the best gift you ever received?
- What was good, and not so good about that?
- What happened next?
- What is most important to you in that situation?
- What might happen if you choose that option?
- What do you give up if you do what you are thinking?
- What might you gain if you try this approach?
- How could you cope if that happened?