

## Tough (Yet Critical) Conversations at the Dinner Table

Family talk at the dinner table is one of the best ways to open the lines of communication between you and your children and/or adolescents. Knowing the difference between mission-based and human connection-based conversations is vital to making those conversations meaningful and impactful.

### Mission-based conversations

A mission-based conversation aims to discuss topics surrounding actionable items, such as to-do lists, school projects and work updates. These topics are often surface level and rarely involve emotionally driven connections, but they may also serve as a conversation starter.

Mission-based prompts:

- “How was school?”
- “What homework needs your focus today?”
- “We successfully reached a new goal at work today!”
- “Don’t forget to call \_\_\_\_\_ first thing tomorrow.”

**Reflect on this:** Whether the topic is report cards, errands or the latest Netflix show, engaging in regular, open, mission-based conversations is important for families. Regardless of whether you are having these talks in person or on a video call, connection is key. In fact, when used correctly, mission-based conversations can serve as a tool to warm up to deeper, more meaningful ones. Consider mission-based topics as an icebreaker to transition into human connection-based conversations.

### Human connection-based conversations

A human connection-based conversation is an emotionally led meaningful conversation. Sometimes, these types of conversations are difficult. Oftentimes, these types of conversations open a new channel of communication, allowing families to connect with one another on a deeper level.

Human connection-based prompts:

- “How is your stress level today?”
- “What was the best/worst part of your day?”
- “I hear that was a rough situation. But you made it through.”
- “Based on your report card, it looks like you’re really challenging yourself. I’m proud of you.”

**Reflect on this:** A topic to consider is following up with something your child or teen has mentioned previously. This shows them that you actively listen to them and deeply care about their feelings, regardless of the topic.

## Why is it important to have human connection-based conversations?

Human connection-based conversations are the foundation of making the next generation of our military — and their families — adaptable, strong and resilient. Service members and their families might learn to compartmentalize their feelings and emotions to successfully complete a critical mission. They may not have been given the tools to know how to properly address and express emotions when the time is right.

Intentionally including human connection-based connections at home is the solution to keeping our minds strong and ready for the next mission.

**Reflect on this:** Kids may be reluctant to bring up topics for a variety of reasons. “I saw how busy my mom was growing up. She worked a full-time job, homeschooled my sister and I, and took care of us. She played the role of mom and dad while my dad was deployed. I didn’t want to add to that list of responsibilities, so oftentimes I felt the need to stay silent about my emotional well-being.” What family factors might impact your children’s ability to open up?

## Additional tips for having human connection-based conversations at home:

Use **reflective statements** to create a two-way conversation, as opposed to a Q&A conversation.

### Examples:

- Using acknowledgment responses, such as:
  - Summarize what you heard and ask, “Do I understand correctly?”
  - “Tell me more.”
  - “That sounds like it was hard to do.”
  - “I’m here for you.”
- Check in on the child’s goal for this conversation.
  - “Do you want someone to listen, or do you want me to share advice?”

Utilize **words of affirmation** in your conversations. This will allow children and teens to develop confidence in their conversation skills.

### Examples:

- “You’re one brave kid.”
- “That was very thoughtful of you.”
- “You’re becoming an incredible young adult.”
- “I’m inspired by your vulnerability.”

Ask **open-ended questions**. Avoid one-response questions, such as those that would prompt yes-or-no, or good-or-bad answers.

**Example:** Instead of asking your child, “Was school good today?” try:

- “What was your favorite part about school today?”
- “Who impacted you the most today?”
- “What are the three things you’re most grateful for today?”
- Pace the conversations and **monitor their readiness** to talk. Some times are just not good times to talk. Give space and check in later about important topics.

### **In conclusion**

Two of our most powerful tools in this world are our voice and our ears. When used in the correct way, we can develop a safe environment for our next generation of leaders to embrace vulnerability and cultivate compassion. It can start with conversations at the dinner table.

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