

Timing is Everything

Ever notice that sometimes your child is astonishingly open to your ideas and input? You speak, they hear. And other times (read that as: most of the time) they're less receptive? You speak, they ignore.

Most parenting advice focused on *what to say* to our children, but not *when to say it*. Having the right words can be useful, but timing is one of the most overlooked considerations in our communication with our kids. And also one of the most potent.

Think about how you respond differently depending on what's going on in your life. Sometimes, you're open, engaged, curious, and actually *want* input from the people around you. And other times, you shut down. You don't want to hear from them, and you don't care about their opinions, advice, or preferences.

Why? What's the difference?

Simple. The brain's receptivity fluctuates. Under sustained stress or low mood, attention narrows and new learning doesn't penetrate. If you're hungry, emotional, or tired (or lonely or sick) it's not usually a good time for a deep conversation.

However, a temporary positive shift (perhaps after hard exercise, having a small win, or a moment of real connection) and we see a short window of opportunity open, where the same person who was closed to conversation previously is now open to new perspectives and conversations.

Psychologists describe this process as part of the *Broaden and Build* theory of positive emotions. It works like this:

Negative emotional states cause us to be narrow, serious, and focused on the challenge right in front of us. We become defensive, protective, and we shut down. Positive emotional states cause us to broaden our thinking, be open to ideas, possibilities, and opportunities, and we build resources like relationships.

My shorthand for all of the psycho-babble is this: high emotions = low intelligence. And the reverse is also true. Low emotions = high intelligence.

How does this apply to parenting? Simple.

Our instinct is to jump in and try to "fix" things fast when what will usually work best is to give it time and address it when the time is "right".

Here are a few examples starting with simple and moving to more complex:

The spelling words. Your seven-year-old bombed her spelling test and she's teary about it. The instinct is to sit her down right then and there, and rehearse the words she missed. Don't. Wait until Saturday morning when she's giggling over pancakes, then casually say, "Hey, want to play a quick game with those tricky words from last week?" It's the same activity. But it's a different brain. And you'll get a completely different outcome.

The messy room. Your 11-year-old's bedroom looks like a crime scene and he's just stomped in the door after a rotten day at school. You could launch into the lecture now (and get eye-rolls, slammed doors, and a room that stays messy). "I told you before you left that you couldn't do your activity this afternoon if your room wasn't clean. And you didn't do it! You know what that means?" Or you could feed him, let him decompress, kick the footy with him for ten minutes, and *then* mention the room. After connection and a snack, "Mate, let's take care of that bedroom together and get you to your activity" becomes an invitation rather than an attack.

The friendship drama. Your 14-year-old comes home flat and monosyllabic. Something's happened with her friends, but every question you ask gets "I'm fine" or "nothing." Pushing harder now is only going to bolt the door shut. Instead, be around. Drive her somewhere. Make her favourite dinner. Often it's at 9.30pm, when she wanders into the kitchen while you're wiping down the bench, that she suddenly starts talking. That's the moment you've been waiting for. Timing is everything. Drop everything (quietly) and listen.

The big one. You've searched the history of your son's web browser and discovered that he's been viewing content that literally makes you sick. You had your suspicions previously, confronted him, and you've been lied to. He's out, but coming home any moment. Every part of you wants to explode at him the moment he walks in the door. But a confrontation at 10pm, when he's defensive and you're furious, won't work for anyone. High emotions, low intelligence; for both of you. Sleep on it. The next afternoon, side by side in the car (no eye contact required), open with curiosity rather than accusation: "I saw what you've been doing on the computer while you were out last night. I'm not going to yell. Help me understand what's going on."

None of this means we let things slide or avoid the hard conversations. It means we pick our moment so the hard conversations actually work. The words matter. But the window matters more. Wait for it, and you'll find your child was capable of listening - and answering - all along.



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